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MultipliCities:
The Infrastructure of African American Literature, 1899-1996

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MultipliCities:
The Infrastructure of African American Literature, 1899-1996

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MultipliCities:
The Infrastructure of African American Literature, 1899-1996

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MultipliCities: The Infrastructure of African American Literature, 1899-1996 explores intersections between black fiction and canonical sociology through two extended case studies focusing on the authors Richard Wright and Paul Beatty. The formation of disciplinary sociology in the early twentieth century had a profound influence on the production and reception of African American literature. Sociologists at the University of Chicago were among the first to teach black fiction and poetry in the academy, and institutionalized a social scientific framework for comprehending black culture. This framework, which assumes that black writing produces racial knowledge about black experience, continues to pressure contemporary African American authors through the demands of the publishing industry today. At the same time, though, African American authors throughout the twentieth century have resisted sociological expectations for their work and responded critically to the social scientific study of the black community more broadly. *MultipliCities* studies black writers whose fiction is specifically critical of sociological conceptions of black personhood and place. While Richard Wright's best-selling *Native Son* (1940) has been canonized as a type of sociological fiction, I read against this critical tradition for the ways in which his juvenile

delinquent protagonist, Bigger Thomas, evades his production as a social scientific object. I locate further evidence for Wright's revision of sociological knowledge production in his final, posthumously published novel, *A Father's Law* (1960; 2008), in which the main character is a sociologist and a serial killer who violently deforms the mastery of the social scientific expert. In my second case study, I turn to contemporary novelist Paul Beatty's post-civil rights era novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), which I read as a mock ethnography in its description of a postindustrial ghetto that exceeds the sociological imagination of the so-called "culture of poverty." Though rap music is often interpreted as evidence of the alleged impoverishment of inner-city black community, in my final chapter I read Beatty's "hip hop novel" as challenging the social scientific expectations for black popular culture that are part of the ongoing legacy of the canonical sociology of race.

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INTRODUCTION

The Empirical Fictions of the Chicago School of Sociology

> Sociology…is the Science that seeks the limits of Chance in human conduct.
>
> - W.E.B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant" (44)

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, the sociologist Robert Ezra Park reviewed a number of early collections of "Negro" spirituals and other anthologies of African American literature for *The American Journal of Sociology*. One of the original figures in what would later be known as the Chicago School of Sociology—considered the first sociology department in the US—Park firmly believed that the study of black writing was critical to the larger social scientific project of the sociology of race. He writes in a review of *Mellows: A Chronicle of Unknown Singers* (1925), a collection of slave spirituals:

> What makes this *racial literature* interesting, what makes, finally, any literature significant outside the group for which it is primarily written, is the degree to which it gives access to, and knowledge of, lives other than our own, lives that in this case are strangely alien to us, considering their proximity to our own. (821, my emphasis)

Having joined the Department of Sociology at Chicago after working as Booker T. Washington's director of public relations at the Tuskegee Institute, Park had long been interested in the sociological "problem" of race. For him, the cultural work of, as he called it, "racial literature," was to produce scientific knowledge about minority groups that could be used as evidence in empirical studies of race relations, which became the central focus and the organizing framework for the new science of society at the University of Chicago. Reading black writing gave the social scientist unproblematic and unprecedented "access" to his object of study. As Park observes, "The Negro has always produced poetry of some sort. It has not always been good poetry, but it has been a *faithful reflection* of his inner life" (821, my emphasis). At least for Park, "Negro poetry"

did not have aesthetic value, its worth was to be measured in the degree to which it rendered black social and psychological experience accessible and visible to the student of society.[1]

Alain Locke, philosopher and literary scholar, framed his famous collection, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), as introducing an African American type as-yet unstudied by the social sciences. As he opens his introductory essay:

> In the last decade *something beyond the watch and guard of statistics* has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three norms who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling on their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-Leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. (3, my emphasis)

Park reviewed *The New Negro* for *The American Journal of Sociology* in 1926. His praise for the collection follows Locke's introductory essay, but at the same time realigns African American literature as the proper object of sociological study: "No formal studies, and certainly no statistics that have yet been printed have revealed so much that is significant and important about the Negro and his problem in America as this single volume" (*Mellows* 824). While to some degree Park dismisses the efficacy of quantitative data in capturing the "Negro problem," he nonetheless argues that African American

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[1] Park's interest in African American literature as an object of sociological study was developed from his University of Chicago predecessors, W.I. Thomas and Florian W. Znaniecki, and their work in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918). Therein they outlined the innovative empirical research methodologies of the Chicago School. The methodological innovation of *The Polish Peasant* was its use of documentary evidence, like the inclusion of 862 reprinted personal letters, as its primary mode of understanding the modern, urban experience of immigrants. Thomas outlined this method in his "Race Psychology: Standpoint and Questionnaire" (1912) in which he described "undesigned" materials—"letters, dairies, newspapers, court, church, and club records, sermons, addresses, school curricula, and even handbills and almanacs" (770-72)—as ideal sources in the social scientific study of race relations. At the heart of the five-volume *The Polish Peasant* was a 300-page autobiography by an immigrant, Wladek Wisziewski, that was meant to exemplify the cultural crisis of the urban to rural transition for the typical immigrant. For further discussion of the influence of Thomas and Znaniecki's literary criticism on Chicago School sociology, see Dorothy Ross *The Origins of American Social Science* 346-57.

literature can do similar social scientific work as the statistic.[2] This sociological "formula," as Locke calls it, would continue to develop into a broader paradigm for comprehending black culture as evidentiary, the raw data of black experience to be rendered legible through the observational and theoretical tools of modern science. It was at the University of Chicago that African American literature would first enter the academy.

As he conducted sociological research on the black community on the South Side of Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century, Robert Park taught some of the earliest college courses in African American literature under this social scientific paradigm. Literary scholar Carla Cappetti was one of the first to note this fact based on research in the archives of the University of Chicago. She writes, "At a time when literature courses taught in English departments ended with the seventeenth century and American literature, African American literature, ethnic literature, although they were read, were not considered worthy of critical attention, Chicago sociologists acted to constitute, preserve, and promote them" (31). This historical intersection between African American literature and the sociology of race, the fact that black writing first entered the academy through the social sciences, is the origin point for my line of inquiry in this dissertation. My central concern in this project is the relationship between professional sociological knowledge about racial experience and the emergence of popular literature by African Americans who were the objects of social scientific study. I am interested in the ways in which the emergent discipline of sociology influenced black writers, both in the composition of their stories and in their reception in the literary marketplace. As

[2] It was, in fact, a combination of qualitative (case studies) and quantitative (statistics) approaches that distinguished Chicago School methodology. For more on the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in Chicago School sociology, see Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institution, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (1986) 162-63.

African American literature was included in the academy, what types of narratives were authorized by the new scientific interest in race? This is, finally, a question of how we read black writers today, how our own critical and pedagogical frameworks were formed and how they might be reformed.[3] How, for example, might the history of early twentieth sociology affect our reading of Richard Wright as a modernist or naturalist? How does the cultural work of postmodern black authors like Paul Beatty relate to the legacies of canonical social science?

At the same time that the sociologist Robert Park was studying and teaching African American literature, the first best-selling black writer was reading the social scientific research on black communities that was produced at the University of Chicago. In an introduction to Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake's 1945 social scientific study of the African American community of Chicago's South Side, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945)—a landmark work in the Chicago School's sociology of race—Richard Wright acknowledged the influence of early American sociologists on his life and work, and his own comprehension of racial experience. He cited their research in defense of his own realism in his best-selling debut: "If, in reading my novel, *Native Son* [1940], you doubt the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book" (xx). While Locke attempted to establish African American literature in contradistinction to traditional sociological metrics, Wright sought to align his fiction with social scientific data. If statistics could authorize Wright's novel, then his fiction could reciprocally legitimize sociological research. Cayton, one of several

[3] The relationship between the social sciences and African American culture was clearly a concern of the protesters at Berkeley and other universities in the 1960s, as they challenged disciplinary boundaries and traditional forms of knowledge production. As Ramon A. Guitierrez writes of the activists in the ethnic studies movement, "they demanded that the study of race and ethnicity be removed from the disciplinary homes they had long occupied in departments of sociology and anthropology, where race and ethnicity were pathologized, problematized, and exoticized" (158). In solidarity with the politics of these movements, I explore the origins and legacies of this disciplinary formation.

African American sociologists trained at the Chicago School, confirmed the link between the author's first novel and sociology in a review of *Native Son*: "For every adjective which Wright used we have a label, for every move that Bigger took, we have a map; for every personality type he encountered we have a life history" (104). The model of interpreting Wright's writing through the lens of sociology, of which Cayton provides an early example, helped establish Wright as a canonical African American author and continues to haunt his critical reception. One of my primary goals in this project, though, is to complicate this social scientific reading of Richard Wright as an author of sociological realism and of *Native Son* as a type of map.

As part of their vast quantitative project on modern urban experience, Chicago School sociologists constructed maps that literally rendered race and ethnicity visible on the landscape of the city. Like early reviewers of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for Park and his colleagues, the study of black culture had cartographic value, similarly rendering the racial psyche visible, knowable, and thus manageable the way a map translates a territory for conquest. While these maps signify the *hypervisibility* of the sociological object, through the professionalizing process of constructing a rational and objective conception of the urban space and racial identity, canonical sociologists rendered themselves *invisible*. As historian Henry Yu writes of the invisible point of view of the sociological subject, the map-maker, "The deracinated, universal perspective removed from all points in space was imagined by elite white intellectuals as the embrace of it all" (89). The narrative power of maps and potential of narratives as maps are central one in this project. The maps of the Chicago School emphasize their pointedly scopic relation to both the space of the city and the nature of race. Their frameworks for both the emergent sociology of race and urban sociology, as is perhaps obvious for a nascent social science based on the empirical method, were primarily visual: maps, statistics, and other

information graphics. Another early American sociologist, W.E.B. Du Bois would come to understand that racial experience was problematically determined by the visual apparatus of US culture and problematized the apparent transparency of "black folk" in his reflections on his own disciplinary training.

If Robert Park's study of "Negro" literature was a regressive institutionalization of African American culture within a sociological framework, Du Bois's chapter on the "sorrow songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) offers a progressive argument for different terms on which African American writing might have been included in the canon. As the title of his most famous work suggests, Du Bois was interested in exploring other ways of knowing beyond the visual positivism of the sciences. That Chicago School sociologists did not include Du Bois as a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture," and ignored his significant contribution to social science scholarship in *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899), only underscores the fact that blackness would be object not subject of knowledge production in the emergent discipline (*Souls* 3). The tension between positivism and more mystical means of understanding places and persons is allegorized in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999), in which the conservative, Empiricist school of elevator inspection is challenged by the emergent and transcendent movement of Intuitionism that seeks a "power beyond rationality" (231). The Chicago School sociologists share with Whitehead's Empiricists a mechanistic conception of the city as the determining force in the lives of its black citizens. For Du Bois, like Whitehead, empiricism ultimately fails to properly understand the intersecting histories of African Americans and the city, the dislocations of urban migration and racial formation. The story of W.E.B. Du Bois, who was trained like Park in sociology at Harvard and in Berlin, but whose social scientific career has been largely forgotten,

provides a kind of alternative history and critical framework for the academic institutionalization of African American literature.

From Sociology to Song: The Intuition of W.E.B. Du Bois

If you can't be free, be a mystery.

- Rita Dove, "Canary"

In the fourth chapter of his memoir *Dusk of Dawn: Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940) W.E.B. Du Bois writes of his bourgeoning career as a social scientist at the turn of the nineteenth century. Under the tutelage of William James at Harvard and Max Weber at Frederick William University in Berlin, he had been trained as an undergraduate and graduate student in a curriculum that would now be recognized as sociology.[4] He was optimistic that the emergent discipline would be a means to bring modern science to bear on the problem of race relations; for Du Bois, the sociology of race would be a means of progressive reform. As he writes in his chapter entitled "Science and Empire":

> The Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation. (58)

To this end, Du Bois took a position as an "Assistant Instructor" at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896 to launch a "scientific investigation" of the African American population of the Philadelphia's Seventh Ward. Applying innovative empirical research methods, Du Bois himself went door to door tirelessly conducting multiple surveys of 9,000 of his black neighbors. The data Du Bois collected was published in 1899 as one of

[4] Du Bois writes in *Dusk of Dawn*, "It was at Harvard that my education, turning from philosophy, centered in history and then gradually in economics and social problems. Today my course of study would have been called sociology; but in that day Harvard did not recognize any such science" (39).

the first academic works of urban studies and ethnic studies, the statistically-rich *The Philadelphia Negro*.

The Philadelphia Negro argued against a central presumption of the benefactors of Du Bois's research project and a prevailing viewpoint on race relations at the time. As Du Bois summarized this position, the city was "going to the dogs because of the crime and venality of its Negro citizens" (Qtd. in Lewis 189). Du Bois, though, posited that the apparent criminal pathology of African Americans was not the result of innate depravity on the part of inner-city blacks, but rather a consequence of their physical and social environment. This claim was an early version of the central Chicago School thesis that rejected biological explanations of social experience. Du Bois writes in *The Philadelphia Negro*: "a slum is not a simple fact, it is a symptom and that to know the removable causes of the Negro slums of Philadelphia requires a study that takes one far beyond the slum districts" (6). Though the study received some positive reviews, *The Philadelphia Negro* was largely neglected by social science professionals in its own day; it was never reviewed in *The American Journal of Sociology*. As Du Bois wrote later, "Nobody ever reads that fat volume" (*Darkwater* 15). *The Philadelphia Negro* was lost in the early history of sociology, ignored in the institutionalization of the discipline at the University of Chicago in the following decades, and recovered only later by historians of the social sciences.[5] This "failure" of The Philadelphia Negro evidences the professional difficulties of black sociologists at the time—Du Bois had struggled to find a job at a white university even with a Ph.D. from Harvard and his position at U Penn was unlisted. But, as Du Bois would come to believe, his "social study" also failed because of a problem of methodology in that, as literary critic Susan Mizruchi writes, "however 'rational' its

[5] Earl Wright II makes a convincing argument that Atlanta, not Chicago, should be considered the first "school" of sociology; see his "Using the Master's Tools: The Atlanta Sociological Laboratory and American Sociology, 1896-1924."

methods, however vigorous its aims, sociology...was a social fatalism deadly to Black folk" (275).[6] Even within the progressive discourses of the social sciences, Du Bois saw only a limited potential for black personhood.

In his autobiography Du Bois writes of a moment when this realization about his chosen field of study dawned on him: "At the very time when my studies were most successful, there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored" (67). The "red ray" that Du Bois refers to was the lynching of Sam Hose in 1899. Hose, a field hand, had been accused of murdering his landlord, Alfred Cranford, and raping Cranford's wife. Knowing that such accusations were often unfounded—as this one was later proved to be through Ida B. Wells's research into the events—Du Bois set out to write a reasoned statement about the dangers of vigilante justice in the form of lynch mobs for publication in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. As he passed a local grocery store walking his letter to the newspaper offices, he discovered that he was too late: Hoses's knuckles were on display in the window, for sale.[7] For Du Bois, this window display evidenced the guilt of the sharecropper in the myopic eyes of US culture. Du Bois writes of his tragic epiphany in that moment, "once could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved" (67).[8] Du Bois in fact continued his work as a professor of sociology at Atlanta University after this incident—indeed, launching one of the most expansive and comprehensive studies of

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[6] For more on Du Bois's *The Philadelphia* Negro, see the collection of essays edited by Michael B. Katz and Thomas J. Sugrue, *W.E.B. Dubois, Race, and the City* (1998).

[7] For more on the Hose lynching, see Philip Dray's account in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (2003) 3-16.

[8] Du Bois would be reminded again of this problem during the Atlanta race riots of 1906. He was out of town conducting research in Lowndes County Alabama when the riots of began. His project in the Lowndes County study was to demonstrate the measureable domestic virtues of rural blacks in order to counter the dominant white supremacist belief in the biological inferiority of African Americans. While engaged in this social scientific study, back in Atlanta, newspaper headlines reporting black assaults on white women enraged crowds of young white men to attack random blacks throughout the city.

African American urban culture to date as director of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory—but his empirical project would be repeatedly interrupted by the hyperrealities of race relations in the US. He would come to view canonical sociology as problematically complicit with the production of the unreal images of blackness that displaced actual experience despite their positivistic claims.[9] His next major publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), marked in writing a turn away from his disciplinary training in the social sciences and an embrace of a different way of knowing, or hearing, African American culture, the musical, and also literary, criticism of "The Sorrow Songs."

The Souls of Black Folk marks a distinct shift toward a more, as Alfred Young describes the collection of essays, "existential" approach to race-relations, if not an outright critique of sociology's empirical method (46). The book of essays opens with Du Bois himself seemingly the object of distanced, scientific observation, and the "unasked question" that underlies sociological inquiry, "How does it feel to be a problem?" a question he knew was inherent in his surveys for *The Philadelphia Negro* (*Souls* 1). In the closing chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The Sorrow Songs," Du Bois launches a pointed critique of contemporary social scientific thought: "So wofully [sic] unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of 'swift' and 'slow' in human doing, and the limits of human perfectibility, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science" (162). Here Du Bois links the opacity of social scientific research to the central trope of the "veil" in the first chapter of *Souls*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings"; despite its technologies of hypervisibility, sociology ironically contributes to the problem of vision that is at the heart of US race relations. In the context

[9] Here I am invoking the vocabulary of Jean Baudrillard, and particularly his definition of the simulacrum as an image with "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (6).

of his final ethnomusicological essay, Du Bois argues for the sonic potencies of African American spirituals as an alternative way of understanding black experience. Du Bois signals this radical curricular revision throughout Souls with the double epigraphs that head each chapter, lines of poetry from English literature alongside bars of music from the "sorrow songs."

For Du Bois, the spirituals are the key to the souls of black folk. As he writes in his forethought to the book, "Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs—some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past" (viii). An "echo," nonetheless a song, is not as accessible to be read and analyzed as a text, or a social scientific survey. Reading the musical bars in *Souls* just for basic comprehension requires specialized knowledge that not all readers can be expected to possess. Moreover, even if we can understand the notation, how are we to speculate about the "real" experiences of the singers from this evidence? How knowable, in fact, are the "sorrow songs"? The problem is one of perception, opposing the scopic—the hypervisible information graphics of *The Philadelphia Negro* and of canonical sociological readings of African American literature—with the sonic—the easily accessible musical strophes of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Read against his previous work in Negro, then, Souls argues that the observational foundation of the empirical method was deeply problematic. In terms of accessing African American psychology, Du Bois offers that the spirituals, while expressing a certain historical reality of African American experience in the US plantation slave system, can provide only "glimpses" and "eloquent omissions and silences" (259). The "sorrow songs" were "glimpses," or perhaps, as in Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, "flashes," that would be lost before they could be fully recognized, important not as evidence for further transparency, but as exceeding that very

methodological approach (*Illuminations* 255).[10] While Park's sociology attempted above all to reveal the racial interiorities of blackness, Du Bois sought to preserve the "mystery" of African American culture as a kind of radical musical freedom form absolute knowability, as Rita Dove suggests is the power of Billie Holiday in her poem "Canary." Music proved more useful to Du Bois than social scientific data in exploring what remained his goal throughout his life and work: the revelation of a more complicated, almost mystical understanding of African American personhood accessed through the slave spiritual.

I follow Du Bois in making this same turn from sociology to song in the final chapter of this dissertation in which I read Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) as a "hip hop novel" that channels the "black noise" of rap music. More broadly, though, the sonic becomes a figure for my investigation of other modalities for comprehending black experience outside the rational and empirical frameworks of canonical sociology. In his reading of Du Bois's critique of social scientific positivism in "Sociology Hesitant" (1905), Ronald Judy describes this other way of knowing as "generating complexities and complications in its density rather than resolving difference in its translucence."[11] For Judy, Du Bois navigated the incongruities between "subject-of-experience" and the "subject-of-knowledge" through third alternative: "the subject-of-narrativity" (35). In his later writing, Du Bois turned repeatedly to fiction—and to romantic and speculative genres of fiction that eschewed realism—as an alternative, perhaps more intuitive or

[10] Benjamin's work is critical to this project for two reasons. First, he was, like Du Bois, a proto-urban sociologist himself, and his deep concern for cities is evident throughout his writing, especially in *The Arcades Project*. Second, Benjamin's theories of knowledge production are useful for understanding the intersecting and diverging discourses of modernity, and I reference here one of his most famous essays, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," specifically to this purpose.

[11] For more on Du Bois's essay, see the collection of essays edited by Ronald Judy in *Boundary 2*.

affective, approach to the "negro problem."[12] In the same way, twentieth century African American literature critically engages the disciplinary formation of sociology, offering a different perspective on the black communities so often the object of social scientific research. The life and work of W.E.B. Du Bois embodies the central tension of this project, the fraught relationship between sociology and black literature in their conception and perception of urban space and racial identity.

From Statistical Personhood to Complex Personhood

> The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that is could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place.
>
> - Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness" (177)

The conflicting perspectives embodied above in Park and Du Bois, between the empirical and the intuitive, continued throughout the intersecting twentieth century histories of race relations and urban space, and are a major point of tension throughout the extended case studies that compose this dissertation. The historical span of this study begins in a moment that Susan Mizruchi refers to as the period of the nation's "multicultural becoming" with Park's and Wright's varying accounts of the migratory ruptures of industrial urban experience in early twentieth century Chicago, and concludes in the era of state-sponsored multiculturalism with Beatty's postmodern excavations of

[12] Maria Farland has recently read Du Bois's fiction writing within the context of his social scientific career in order to deepen understanding of his turn from the sociological to the literary. Farland critiques earlier scholars for reading Du Bois's first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), within a realist mode, instead arguing the work belongs to the tradition of domestic fiction that offered the writer an important alternative to reform from the sociological approach. As Nancy Bentley has recently argued, Du Bois turned to literature as a critical response to the limits of the sociological imagination. She notes that Du Bois experimented with fantasy writing not unlike science fiction in an unpublished story entitled "A Vacation Unique" in order to explore what he called the "fourth dimension" of race, that invisible dimension of racial experience not prone to scientific investigation (Qtd. in Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920* [2009] 214).

the ruins of the postindustrial city of Los Angeles in the late twentieth century ("Becoming" 413). The Chicago School institutionalized the sociology of race and urban sociology. The authors I study here work through and against canonical social science by imagining alternative understandings of black placehood and personhood.

Mark Seltzer locates a conception of personhood in the linked discourses of American literary realism and early American social science that is critical to my thinking in this project.[13] For Seltzer, "a discourse about agency, chance, and causation…underwrites both the emergence of nineteenth-century social science or 'social physics' and styles of realist and naturalist representation: the discourse of statistics" (5). What he refers to as "statistical persons" in an analysis of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies in the Tenements* (1890) are constructed through "one of the dominant projects of later nineteenth-century realism: what might be described as the project of 'accounting for' persons" (93). For Du Bois, the image of the sociologist "counting bastards" exemplified the limits on black personhood imposed by sociologists, which eventually turned him from his disciplinary training. The typological method of the Chicago School of Sociology formalized such "accounting for persons" as a basic tool in the nascent science of society. Though I will complicate this analysis, Richard Wright's famous protagonist Bigger Thomas has been read as just such a "statistical

[13] Within the context of heightened urbanization and industrialization, rising class struggle, and the increasingly problematic issue of race, Susan Mizruchi argues, both sociologists and fiction writers were primarily concerned with comprehending and controlling the "bewildering heterogeneity" of the emerging metropolis. Mizruchi writes:
"The dedication to knowing the social whole that gripped an emerging sociological discipline is readily seen as consistent with the ambitions of contemporaneous novelists. What is less often recognized are their various involvements (direct and indirect) with the anxieties, premises, and methods of this new science of society. The response of writers such as Herman Melville, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Theodore Dreiser, to the formulation of a science that professionalized the main business of novelists—social observation, description of human types of interaction, the classification of these types—is an untold story whose narration provides a critical index to the social engagement of American novels," "Fiction and the Science of Society" 190-91.

person," accountable as a typical juvenile delinquent when compared with ethnographic study of the same urban type. The concept of the "statistical person" lends itself to my discussion here, not only because of its genealogy in Progressive Era realism, but because of sociology's emergence as a literally statistical discipline that accounted for its objects of study numerically. Part of the accounting for persons was in response to the increasing diversification of the modern metropolis at the end of the nineteenth century—Riis's chapter titles in *How the Other Half Lives* essentially outline various ethnic enclaves in the Lower East Side as a way of making sense of the increasing multiculturalism of New York City. What might be called statistical conceptions of race, then, emerged at this time, conceptions of racial identity that overvalued authenticity.[14] The late nineteenth century "accounting for persons" has a late twentieth century disciplinary counterpart in what Robin D.G. Kelley has called, in the context of War on Poverty ghetto ethnography, "looking for the 'real' nigga." The realist "statistical person," though, also has its antithesis in a postmodern perception of personhood that will be a useful critical framework here.

In contrast to the realist conception of statistical personhood, rogue sociologist Avery Gordon calls for recognition instead of a "complex personhood": the messy fact that "all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything)

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[14] In this same time period, American literary realist William Dean Howells became a critical advocate of writing by African American and other minority authors, celebrating their work according to specific narrative conventions, what Gene Andrew Jarrett has called, in the case of black authors, "racial realism" (*Deans* 1). For Jarrett, racial realism linked and continues to link the marketability of black authors to their authenticity, their production of racial knowledge for reading audiences. Though he begins with an account of Howells's promotion of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Jarrett includes Richard Wright among the "deans" of African American letters that he critiques in his *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007). He argues of Wright, "The dean of the Chicago renaissance, while opening the doors of opportunity for some, indeed created critical, commercial, and canonical consequences for others" (134). Wright's tenure as dean of black literature, I would agree, had much to do with the author's use of Chicago School social science in his fiction. But, as I will make clear below, the author was truant from critical expectations for his writing to be sociologically realistic.

remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others" (4). For Gordon, "complex personhood" necessitates that social scientists attend to the "hauntings" that exceed their disciplinary categories—for her own part, following Du Bois, she often turns toward the humanities in her writing. As I will argue below that the "complex personhood" of Bigger Thomas, a typical juvenile delinquent in the statistical sense, has yet to be fully recognized by scholars. Paul Beatty makes a similar argument in evoking the complex racial formation of his black "white boy" in the post-civil rights era, who similarly exceeds statistical conceptions of African American personhood. No contemporary critical race theorist has preserved the complexity of racial formation more than Fred Moten. As he defines "blackness" at the opening of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), it is "the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line" (1). The dynamism, if not the elusive poetics of this definition, evoke the complexity of Du Bois's "sorrow songs" in their haunting unfolding of the souls of black folk.

Walking in the City of Conception, Dreaming of Infrastructure[15]

[15] In the January 2007 issue of *PMLA* on the special topic of cities, Patricia Yaeger opens her "Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure" with the pervasive image of ruined cities like New Orleans and Baghdad, but then attempts to outline a "metropoetics, a set of algorithms for mapping the literature of the city" that resists this pathological view of urban space (10). One element of this metropoetics is its attention to infrastructure. As Yaeger writes: "My premise is that our intellectual apparatus…is inadequate for describing the pleasures and pounding of most urban lives, or the fact that many city dwellers survive despite all odds. How can our ethical and imaginative engagements with others around the world be worked into our scholarly infrastructures?" (15). I argue that Wright and Beatty, writing in the ruins of Black Belt kitchenettes in the industrial city of the 1930s and in the postindustrial ruins of modern urban renewal in the 1990s, answer some of these very questions and thus help to further theorize a "metropoetics" that counters canonical sociological views of urban space as pathological and pathologizing. For one, these literally engage the infrastructures of the city, from the systematic residential segregation evidenced in *Native Son* to the segregating effects of the highway system of *The White Boy Shuffle*. Moreover, the writers in this study theorize a metropoetics in response to the failed "intellectual apparatus" of early

> How do we create taxonomies for cities and citizens that are at once off the grid and overly taxonomized? What is it like to be stuck, night and day, *dreaming of infrastructure*?
>
> - Patricia Yaeger, "Dreaming of Infrastructure" (15, my emphasis)

The tension I outline above between statistical and complex personhood can be mapped onto differing ways of viewing urban space that might similarly be located in late nineteenth century realism and late twentieth century postmodernism, the historical and generic bookends of my project here. One of the cornerstones of the Chicago School of Sociology was their vast cartographic project, mapping modern urban types to schematized landscapes of the modern city, linking personhood to place in powerful, but often restricting ways. As a result, I will read the novels under study here through the lenses of space and place. Against the reductiveness of official maps of urban space and race in the modern metropolis, the stories of black experience that I will explore in this dissertation remap, or, better yet, unmap, the data of everyday life in the city organized as social scientific knowledge, exploring alternative cartographies and the dynamic cultural identities plotted therein.

The problem of the city, Amy Kaplan has argued, was central to the cultural work of American literary realism in the late nineteenth century. She locates concerns over the "unreality" of modern city life in the experience of urban uprising and the crisis of immigration. In reading William Dean Howell's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) and Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, she argues that "In both fiction and nonfiction, 'the city' often signifies 'the unreal,' the alien, or that which has not yet become realized." The cultural work of urban realism, then, was "To realize the city as a subject for representation," "to combat its otherness and to fix its protean changes within a

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American sociology, the legacy of which I think Yaeger is responding to in her novel methodology for reading city literature.

coherent narrative form" (44). Anxieties about such urban "otherness" at the turn of the century were at least in part heightened first by the influx of foreign immigrants and then by the following migration of African Americans to Northern cities, and particularly by the ways the presence of these groups troubled concepts of both urban citizenship and urban space. Carla Cappetti makes a similar argument in relation to University of Chicago social science in the early twentieth century. For Cappetti, the "main intellectual thrust" of canonical sociology was "to counter the traditional view of the modern American city as chaos, invisibility, 'unnatural nature,' and outside history—in essence as temporal and spatial otherness—through the production of some of the earliest and most original frameworks for the analysis of the city as both culture and change" (36). Sociology, and the social science of literary realism, both worked to calm the "frantic panoramas" of Howell's metropolis (184). To borrow again from Mark Seltzer, they sought to produce "panoramas in perspective" (*Bodies and Machines* 18).

James Kyung-Jin Lee's essay, "The City as Region," outlines a methodology for writing about the literature of cities throughout US history that helps me articulate the modal tension between canonical sociology and African American literature in terms of urban space. Lee's work operates like a piece of infrastructure in the cityscape of this dissertation, inspiring and undergirding the project from beginning to end. On the place of the city in the US literary imaginary, Lee writes, "The American city begets literary casuists":

> those who, like screaming street-corner preachers, toll God's wrath, natural disaster, or blank lives to readers who might have eyes to see. Always fallen from that fictive origin on the Hill, the city makes machines of men, wearies its women, and pours enervating concrete and tar everywhere else. Conceived from the mind of man, the city cannot satiate its edifice complex and builds itself toward Faustian heights on the top of the bones of countless arrested breaths. ("City" 137)

Lee outlines the construction of this "Unreal City" in American literature from the agrarian myth of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) to modernist fiction like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) with its "valley of ashes." For my purposes here, this "city of conception" is constructed through the disciplinary tools of the Chicago School, with their maps, statistical figures, and other information graphics. As I argue below, this totalizing view of the city is countered by writers who perceive, rather than conceive of, urban space. As Lee writes, "Seen not from above, but rather from underneath a bridge or freeway, the city of perception remains partial and provisional, never spinning a vision of the city with a semblance of totality" ("City" 151). Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, living underground the city, but perhaps seeing it all the more clearly from that perspective, the writers under study here offer such partial glimpses, from Chicago's Black Belt to inner-city Los Angeles.

Sociological *Erasure*: The Social Scientific Genealogy of Multiculturalism

Behold the invisible!

- Percival Everett, *Erasure* (212, 219).

In Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), a struggling postmodern novelist, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, decides for ironic and economic reasons to embrace his own statistical personhood and write a mock ethnography of an imaginary ghetto upbringing, first titled *My Pafology* then later simply *Fuck*, under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh.[16]

[16] The pseudonym refers to Stagger Lee Shelton the infamous late nineteenth century pimp and murder sung into African American history first through Mississippi John Hurt and later through the hit by Lloyd Price. The citation of Stagger Lee is meant to evoke a genealogy of popular black criminal icons that include fictional characters like Bigger Thomas and the personas of late twentieth century gangster rappers. Robin D.G. Kelley emphasizes the history of popular pimp narratives like the Stagger Lee story within the African American vernacular in order to contextualize the alleged exceptionalism of late twentieth century gangster rap. Writes Kelley, "we need to go back to the blues, to the baaadman tales of the late nineteenth century, and to the age-old tradition of 'signifying' if we want to discover the roots of the 'gangsta' aesthetic in hip hop." See *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (1996) 187.

Monk is repeatedly told by his agent to "settle down and write true, gritty real stories of black life," echoing the rejections of publishers that he is "not black enough" (2, 43). His author's note reads: "Widely unread experimental stories and novels. Considered dense and inaccessible" (225). *My Pafology*, however, which is marketed as straight nonfiction, is a hit, the book winning a major literary prize, the movie rights selling for three million dollars, and the author receiving an invitation to appear on a fictionalized version of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.[17] Monk's success thus comes through the same means that it did for Richard Wright: social scientific authorization. He fulfills Park's racialized demands for black literature to become a type of sociological evidence. Everett suggests an awareness of this longer historical entanglement between ghetto ethnography and black fiction in that *My Pafology* loosely rewrites Richard Wright's widely-celebrated novel *Native Son*. As a revision of Wright but set in the post-civil rights era, *Erasure* helps me frame my project here, which begins with an analysis of Wright's first and final novels, and ends with a reading of Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*, which tells the story of the young black poet, Gunnar Kaufman, who, like Everett's Ellison, is misread as writing ethnography.[18]

My Chapter 1, "Unmapping Race Relations in the 'Modern Authority' of *Native Son*," reviews the history of Richard Wright's relationship to canonical sociology, and his

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[17] Everett's novel is likely a commentary on the popularity of Sapphire's novel *Push: A Novel* (1996), the story of an adolescent black girl in New York City struggling to get her life together after being repeatedly raped by her father, whose children she bears. *Erasure* itself received limited distribution through its publication by an academic press. Meanwhile, *Push* has since been released as a film *Precious: Based on the Novel* Push *By Sapphire* (2009), which was nominated for six Academy Awards.

[18] In Ellison's *My Pafology*, as in Wright's novel, Stagg R. Leigh goes to work for a "Dalton" family. Though African American in Everett's updated narrative, the Daltons are wealthy, members of the black bourgeois, and the "underclass" Leigh experiences an alienation similar to Bigger in Wright's original fiction. I further investigate this tension in *Erasure* between African American middle and working class experiences in my final chapters on Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*, which tells the story of the young black poet, Gunnar Kaufman, who, like Everett's Ellison, is misread as writing ethnography.

production as a sociological subject. However, I read Wright's now canonical debut novel against that history, uncovering the ways in which the author in fact critiques the authority of Chicago School social science through Bigger Thomas's constant evasion of his own mappability and his production as a typical sociological object, the juvenile delinquent.

In Chapter 2, "The Cartographic Violence of *A Father's Law*" I further complicate Wright's relationship to canonical sociology through an analysis of his unfinished, posthumously-published final novel, in which the character of the sociologist is a serial killer who violently deforms the mastery of the sociological subject. Through Tommy Turner, Wright takes his critique a step further, unmapping the Chicago School of Sociology's cartographic conceptions of urban space and racial identity.

Named for one of the most famous sociologists of race in the twentieth century, Gunnar Myrdal, the suburban black protagonist of *The White Boy Shuffle* is figured as a sociologist in the novel, as he attempts to comprehend inner-city black identity after his family moves from Santa Monica to West Los Angeles. In Chapter 3, "Looking for the 'Real' Nigga" in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*," I read the novel as a mock ghetto ethnography that does not so much produce racial knowledge as Park demanded of "racial literature," but instead exceeds typologies of black personhood.

Finally, in Chapter 4, "The Hip Hop Novel and "Keeping it (Sur)real," I take that Du Bosian turn from sociology to song through a sonic reading of *The White Boy Shuffle* as a critical distortion of sociological concepts of place, imagining rap music as a "metropoetics" of postindustrial ruin. In the resistant tradition of hip hop music, Beatty's novel offers an alternative history of the decay and renewal of the city of the late twentieth century, one that foregrounds the infrastructure of the culture of poverty.

That *My Pafology* is a revision of an earlier work emphasizes a central point that Everett argues about the industry of African American literature: not only is the satire of Monk's novel lost on audiences in their ethnographic reading, but so is its plagiarism. Monk copies a canonical sociological fiction about black experience to reproduce a story about alleged everyday African American urban experience in the late twentieth century. Leigh thus fulfills a paradoxical desire in his audience: the scopophilia for racial knowledge of "how the other half lives" but also the comforting revelation of that knowledge within a familiar social scientific framework. Leigh's legibility, his visibility, though, renders black experience illegible and invisible in another sense, foregrounding a tension that underwrites the larger story I want to tell here between the hypervisibilty and invisibility of the ethnographic imagination of African American literature. It is an irony that Everett seems aware of in the repeated refrain in *Erasure*, echoing the protagonist's namesake: "Behold the invisible!"

FATHER'S LAWS AND NATIVE SONS: RICHARD WRIGHT'S GENEALOGY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Introduction

> Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority.
>
> - *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)

Ruddy Turner, the main character of Richard Wright's final and unfinished novel, *A Father's Law* (1960; 2008), like the author's most famous protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is woken suddenly on the first page of the book.[19] In *Native Son* (1940), Bigger awakes to the sound of an alarm clock in a rat-infested kitchenette on the South Side of Chicago, while Ruddy wakes to a telephone ringing in a suburban home on the outskirts of the same city. The alarming sound of technology that opens *Native Son* signals, as Werner Sollors has argued, the rupture of the modern into the lives of black migrants from the US South to the urban North in the early twentieth century ("Modernization" 22). The telephone in *A Father's Law*, which calls Ruddy into the police commissioner's office and up for a promotion within the Chicago Police Department, represents a clearer line to modernization. This more peaceful transition was perhaps only imaginable from the later vantage point of the civil rights era, when the book was written: the transformation of the racialized other into citizen, and in this case, civic authority, within the modern nation state.

Both these stories, though, are chapters in a broader sociological narrative. In Wright's first, best-selling novel, he presents the pathological case study of an illiterate and impoverished rural folk arriving in the city only to be ground down through the forces of "civilization." In his recently published last writings, the author looks at the second-generation children of those same migrants and immigrants as they assimilate into native sons and daughters through the crucible of the modern metropolis. These canonical

[19] In the only peer-reviewed academic article written on Wright's final novel, Robert Butler also notes the parallelism between the opening scenes in the posthumously published work and *Native Son*. See Butler's "Signifying and Self-Portraiture in Richard Wright's *A Father's Law*" 55.

sociological narratives were formulated in the decades preceding the publication of *Native Son* at the University of Chicago through the work of Robert Ezra Park, Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth, and other early US social scientists. They were outlined in Park and Burgess's *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), the dominant textbook of the discipline up through the publication of Wright's first novel in 1940. The central narrative of Park and Burgess's text was that of the race-relations cycle, which structured the book as a whole through chapters on each of the four progressive stages: "competition," "conflict," "accommodation," and "assimilation." The race-relations cycle accounted for both the alarming ruptures and eventual conformities in the construction of modern citizenship.

By the time Wright sat down to draft *A Father's Law* in 1960, the Chicago School race-relations cycle had been written into law through the "sociological jurisprudence" argument of the NAACP legal team in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).[20] The "modern authority" cited by Chief Justice Earl Warren in footnote eleven of the Court's decision referenced the research of Chicago School-influenced social scientists. Among the sociological studies that were cited by the Court in *Brown v. Board* were Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) and E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro in the United States* (1949)—Frazier had been trained at the University of Chicago, as had many of the researchers who contributed to Myrdal's study.[21] In fact, Wright's *Native Son* was itself indirectly cited by the Court:

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[20] Lee Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (1998) 168. Baker offers a detailed account of how the NAACP legal team built their argument in *Brown* using social scientific theory and research in his chapter "Unraveling the Boasian Discourse" 168-87.

[21] The full footnote in *Brown* reads as follows: "K. B. Clark, Effect of Prejudice and Discrimination on Personality Development (Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, 1950); Witmer and Kotinsky, Personality in the Making (1952), c. VI; Deutscher and Chein, The Psychological Effects of Enforced Segregation: A Survey of Social Science Opinion, 26 J. Psychol. 259 (1948); Chein, What are the Psychological Effects of Segregation Under Conditions of Equal Facilities?, 3 Int. J. Opinion and Attitude Res. 229 (1949); Brameld, Educational Costs, in Discrimination and National Welfare (MacIver, ed.,

included in footnote eleven's list of "modern authorities" was the *Truman Administration's Personality in the Making: The Fact-Finding Report of the Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth* (1950), which in turn referenced the best-selling novel as "fictional case study" in juvenile delinquency.[22] While Wright's protest fiction might have expressed an insurgent position on race relations at the time of its composition, its subsequent popularity as a Book-of-the-Month Club publication coincided with what contemporary sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe in their *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986) as the rise of the integrationist paradigms of the Chicago School to "progressive/liberal 'common sense'" in the post-War period (14).

The ascendance of Chicago School sociology to the dominant liberal narrative of race relations in *Brown* is the critical historical context for my chapters on Richard Wright. In *Native Son*, Bigger imagines a mass movement of African Americans for civil rights. Wright narrates his protagonist's thoughts: "Dimly, he felt that there should be one direction in which he and all other black people could go whole-heartedly" (115). But while the author anticipates the collective action against racial inequality of the 1950s, such unity exists only in Bigger's dreams in 1940—the collective action that takes place in the book is that of the lynch mob that surrounds the county courthouse where Bigger later awaits trial. The oral arguments of Communist lawyer Boris Max in the final section of the book, though, remarkably anticipate the social scientific jurisprudence of NAACP chief counsel Thurgood Marshall in *Brown*; both were based firmly on the emergent

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(1949), 44-48; Frazier, The Negro in the United States (1949), 674-681. And see generally Myrdal, An American Dilemma (1944)."

[22] The novel was referenced as sociological evidence in a section of the *Report* entitled "The Effects of Prejudice and Discrimination," which briefly analyzes *Native Son* as an example of how "anti-white hostility…is generated by the pervasive frustrations inherent in the conditions of life of the masses of American Negroes" (Witmer and Ktotinsky 143).

sociological theories of the Chicago School. Bigger Thomas, like the children of Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll experiments cited in footnote eleven, is evidence of the psychological damage of segregation.[23] As Max argues, the juvenile delinquent's violent actions, and the alleged pathology of inner-city black culture, were the result of impoverished environmental conditions in the urban North specifically and the legacy of systematic racial injustice in the US more generally. The character of the State's Attorney in the novel, David A. Buckley, meanwhile rehearses the biological argument of racial inferiority that had been the dominant understanding of race in the US since *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). In his best-selling novel of 1940, Wright thus stages the paradigm shift in race relations that would be legislated in the 1954 decision in *Brown*.

While Wright does not mention the Supreme Court's decision or any major civil rights events in *A Father's Law*, the apparent opportunity evidenced in Ruddy's promotion is the fulfillment of the movement's dream of racial equality.[24] The 1950s context of *A Father's Law*, given the early achievements of the civil rights movement, is obviously distinct from the 1930s of *Native Son* and the struggles of the Great Migration and urbanization that provided the background to that novel.[25] *A Father's Law* reflects social changes, enacted formally through *Brown v. Board*, in the narrative's focus on a integrated middle-class, suburban black family, the ideal and idyll of the assimilationist argument of Chicago School sociologists and the NACCP attorneys. I contend that *A*

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[23] Daryl Michael Scott has traced the long history of damage imagery in the study of African American culture in his *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (1997). For Scott, integration was premised in part on the inferiority of black institutions and perpetuated pathological conceptions of black culture (xviii). Though Scott reads Wright as complicit in this history, I will argue that Bigger Thomas is not simply further evidence of the damaged black psyche (98-103).

[24] The journalist Ollie Stewart relates meeting Wright at the Monaco café in Paris in the days after the *Brown* decision. The author was excited, drinking a rare beer, and said, "no matter what happens, the kids will have *the law* on their side" (Qtd. in Rowley 440, my emphasis).

[25] Robert Butler briefly sketches the different "social environments" of Wright's first and final fictions, focusing primarily on the "vastly different family situations" of the two protagonists (58, 59).

Father's Law, written in self-imposed exile from the US six years after *Brown*, registers the aftereffects of the Court's decision, the paradigm shifts of the civil rights era at large, and the beginnings of a supposedly post-racial, or at least post-racist, moment of the second half of the twentieth century.[26] In the novel, however, Wright examines the limits of the legislative rights gained through integration as well as the exclusions included in normative citizenship. In *A Father's Law*, Wright challenges the teleological politics of the race-relations cycle; though the Turners are chronologically—through the decision in *Brown*—and geographically—through their move to the suburbs—assimilated, a new "scene of subjection" haunts this civil rights era moment.[27] As a professional policeman, a "model minority" in his assimilation into the new social order of the multicultural nation state, Ruddy Turner embodies a certain "modern authority."[28] But his son, Tommy, a second-generation migrant and a successful student at the University of Chicago, embodies the specific educational promises of desegregation—as Warren wrote, education was "the foundation of good citizenship" and essential to a democratic society (*Brown v. Board*). Yet Ruddy ultimately fails to police the borders his own bourgeois household, as it becomes increasingly evident that his son, the sociologist, is a serial

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[26] Though it is clearly anachronistic to refer to 1960 as a "post-racial" moment, my point is that Wright anticipates what Stephen Steinberg has called the "liberal retreat" from racial politics that followed the civil rights movement. In part, this "liberal retreat" from racial politics was made possible by *Brown*'s acceptance of the Chicago School of Sociology's "ethnicity paradigm." See Steinberg, *Turning Back* 107-36. I will discuss the post-civil rights era moment more extensively in my later chapters.

[27] In this reading of the post-civil rights moment, I follow Richard Iton's application of Saidiya Hartman's notion of "scenes of subjection." As Hartman writes of her re-examination of the failures of Reconstruction, "I examine the role of rights in facilitating the relations of domination, the new forms of bondage enabled by proprietorial notions of self, and the pedagogical and legislative efforts aimed at transforming the formerly enslaved into rational, acquisitive, and responsible individuals." See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997) 6. For Iton, the liberation of the civil rights, like that of Emancipation, contains its own subjugations as well. See Iton 196-97.

[28] Though the stereotype of the model minority emerged, as Robert G. Lee recounts in *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), as an assimilable category of ethnicity in opposition to unassimilable blackness of race, Ruddy nonetheless conforms to the most basic definition. His success is also the result of "stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement" 145.

killer, a deviance of a different order than the juvenile delinquent of *Native Son*, and one that exceeds the sociological imagination of the Chicago School. If *Native Son*, and the sociological narrative that the novel was often read as a fictionalization of, had served as an intellectual underpinning of *Brown* in 1954, the 1960 *A Father's Law* challenges rather than ratifies the "modern authority" of canonical social science. Moreover, this challenge demands a reconsideration of Wright's relationship to Chicago School sociology throughout his life and work.

While Plessy v. Ferguson had legitimized de jure segregation on the basis of a pseudo-scientific understanding of race—as Associate Justice Henry B. Brown asserted in the social Darwinist majority opinion, "If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane"—*Brown* overturned the "separate but equal" ruling in part by redefining race as culture, based largely on contemporary sociological theories of race-relations developed at the University of Chicago (*Plessy v. Ferguson*).[29] Omi and Winant refer to this conception of race as the "ethnicity paradigm" as it was based in theorizing the problem of race through the analogy of European immigrant experience.[30] By equating race with ethnicity, Chicago School sociologists argued for an integrated view of a rapidly changing US culture, one that could assimilate both foreign immigrants and domestic minorities alike.

While their major contribution to critical race studies, and to the civil rights movement, was this paradigm shift from biological to cultural understandings of race, Park and other University of Chicago social scientists repeatedly grounded and legitimized their theories in biological metaphors to the point that that Chicago School of

[29] For more on the racist pseudo-science of *Plessy*, see Baker 28-29.
[30] For more on the "ethnicity paradigm" and its early twentieth century evolution, see Omi and Winant 14-24.

Sociology came to be known as the "ecological school" of urban studies.[31] The race-relations cycle, for example, through which successive generations of migrants and immigrants would progress toward adaptation or assimilation, followed an evolutionary logic.

As the titles of both Wright novels under study here demonstrate, in their references to fathers and sons, the author was particularly concerned with the alleged genetic origins and generational transformation of black identity throughout his career. The irony of Wright's best-selling title is that Bigger Thomas is the case study of a "native son" not because of his biological racial inheritance, but because he is a cultural product of the failure of postwar US democracy. According to the the "father's law," Tommy Turner, the second-generation offspring of a rural migrant, can be read as a test case for the nation's acceptance of the cultural conception of race and black enfranchisement that resulted from that paradigm shift.[32]

The thematic overlap between Wright's fiction and canonical social science, along with significant biographical evidence about the author's personal relationship with Chicago School sociology and sociologists, has led a number of scholars to read Wright's fiction through the framework of the race-relations cycle and other early US sociological paradigms.[33] This tautological hermeneutic continues to be the normative approach to

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[31] Of course, Franz Boas and his colleagues in anthropology were important contributors to this paradigm shift as well. For more on Boas's influence on *Brown*, see Baker, *From Savage to Negro*. For more on how the Boasian culture concept influenced literary realism, see Michael Elliott, *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism* (2002) 1-34.

[32] Generational change was critical to the Chicago School cultural paradigm. It was the younger generations of immigrants and migrants that would, by passing through the stages of the race-relations cycle, successfully assimilate into mainstream US culture. As Park observed of Asian American second-generation offspring as part of the 1926 Race Relations Survey on the Pacific Coast in his "Behind Our Masks": "something extraordinary is taking place in these same children. They are growing up to be Americans" (*Race and Culture* 249).

[33] There has been significant scholarship on Wright relationship with the Chicago School: Günter Lenz, "Southern Exposures: The Urban Experience and the Re-construction of Black Folk Culture and Community in the Works of Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston" (1981); John M. Reilly, "Richard

Wright's work despite the warning of Werner Sollors that because his fiction was partially based on his reading into Chicago School of Sociology "such uses of literature as social evidence may be circular" (*Beyond Ethnicity* 9). Christopher Douglas develops Sollors's argument here, also suggesting that reception and criticism of Wright's fiction is caught in a feedback loop, or "conceptual circuit," in which "social-science findings—on 'culture,' the pathology of the Negro family, the effects of racial predjudice—in turn influenced the composition of literary texts, which were then read as evidence of the original theory" ("Bluest Eye" 155). Yet Douglas's reading of *Native Son* is primarily as a fictionalization of Chicago School sociological theory. He outlines how Wright dramatizes the four stages of the Chicago School race-relations cycle, competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation, throughout the narrative of *Native Son*.[34] For Douglas, Wright's bestseller can be read alongside the social scientific evidence cited in *Brown* as an argument for integration based on canonical sociological theory.

Though I will complicate such readings of Wright's first novel as social science, if *Native Son* has been argued to demonstrate the negative effects of segregation, *A Father's Law*, at least at first, portrays the potential resolution of racial tensions in the civil rights era. Through a sociological reading, *A Father's Law* could be argued to narrate the final "assimilation" stage and the successful completion of the cycle, possible through the 1954 Supreme Court decision. I will make the case, however, that Wright's last novel instead comments on the problem of following the progressive, sociologically-constructed narrative of race relations to its logical conclusion. I will complicate readings

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Wright Preaches the Nation: *12 Million Black Voices*" (1982); Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance" (1986); and Sollors, "Modernization as Adultery" (1990). See also chapters on Wright in Cappetti, *Writing Chicago* (1993); Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004); Cynthia Tolentino, *America's Experts: Race and the Fictions of Sociology* (2009); and Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (2009).

[34] See Douglas, *A Genealogy* 70-71.

of Wright's cultural work as a fictionalization of canonical sociology by demonstrating that the author's understudied, posthumously-published final novel in fact exposes the incoherence of social scientific narratives about the lived experience of race in the US.[35] My analysis of *A Father's Law* will help scholars to continue to rethink Wright's engagement with Chicago School sociology and the liberal paradigm of the race-relations cycle that underwrote *Brown*.[36] The posthumous publication of Wright's final novel necessitates that scholars to reconsider canonical sociological readings of the author's earlier work. While it is not until *A Father's Law* that Wright voices a full critique of the incoherency Chicago School sociology, I locate ambivalences in his first novel that laid the groundwork for that critique.

For early American sociologists, the transformation of ethnic minorities into modern citizens could be mapped on a cartographic trajectory from the inner city outward, the ever-expanding periphery figured as the residence of the integrated middle-class. A similar spatial logic underwrites the desegregation decision in *Brown*. This politics of space and race has been understudied in considerations of Wright's relationship with the Chicago School of Sociology. The figure of the map, and the

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[35] By bringing attention to Wright's later work I also intend to shift the critical paradigm that has focused exclusively on his first three major publications, *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and the highly redacted early version of *Black Boy*. *A Father's Law* was only released posthumously, but even Wright's later published works have been largely ignored by scholars.

[36] The scholarly disagreement about Bigger's pathology and Wright's corroboration of assimilative sociology is exemplified in the at times direct exchange between Douglas and Tolentino in their recent book chapters on *Native Son* within this social scientific context. I will argue in my chapter on *A Father's Law* that Wright's final novel develops and clarifies the ambivalence evident in Wright's fiction and scholarship on his relation to the Chicago School. Both Douglas and Tolentino are interested in how Wright engages contemporary concepts of minority citizenship, developing from canonical sociology into the sociological jurisprudence of *Brown*, through his best-selling novel. They come, however, to opposite conclusions. For Douglas, like a sociological case study, Bigger exemplifies the disorganiztion of the African American inner-city. In this reading, Wright argues, like the prosecution in *Brown*, for integration. For Tolentino, *Native Son* critiques canonical sociology and its liberal narrative of race relations that solves the "problems" of the ethnicity cycle through assimilation. While I find Douglas's work valuable historically, I follow recent work by Tolentino and others who continue to read against the grain of Wright's sociological authorship.

concept of the mappability of experience and the narratology of maps, powerfully articulates the totalizing aspirations of canonical sociology. Moreover, as I will argue below, the physicality of maps, the seemingly inherent linkages that they construct between people and places, suggests the resurgence of the biological in the Chicago School's cultural argument about the landscape of race relations in the US. The reading of Wright's novels as maps emphasizes the critical analysis of his fiction within a sociological context. While he engages with their cartographic framework for race relations, Wright reimagines social scientifically-constituted national identity largely through remapping the spatial politics of both the landmark civil rights decision and canonical sociology.

In this two-chapter section on Richard Wright, Chapter 1, "Unmapping Race Relations in the 'Modern Authority' of *Native Son*," focuses on the mapping project that was foundational to the early social scientific study of race and the city in the US, comparing and contrasting the fictional cartography of his best-selling debut novel with the concentric circle schematic of the University of Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess. Such maps distinguished the social scientific expertise of Chicago School sociologists, epitomizing the universal, objective gaze of their "modern authority," a top-down, ungrounded point of view that seems to transcend space. Meanwhile, those that were the objects of that gaze, themselves plotted on maps and irrevocably formed by their environments, were identified as sociological types. I argue that both Wright's adherence to Chicago School cartography and his resistance to it can be located through an attention to space and place in the novel. I begin this chapter by reviewing Burgess's zonal model of modern urban space. Then, with particular attention to the spatial dynamics of canonical sociology, I trace Wright's professional genealogy in the social sciences and

his reconstruction of himself, the poor migrant lost in the city, as a sociological expert and master of urban space. Finally, I turn to reading his best-selling first novel through and against the canonical cartographies of the Chicago School. For the most part, *Native Son*, as a highly mappable, or cartographically realistic text, aligns with Burgess's zonal map of the modern metropolis. The inner and outer zones of the city are dramatized in the narrative through the polar sites of the Thomas kitchenette and the Dalton home. These zones are both real places in the city of Chicago as well as symbolic spaces representing degrees of pathology and assimilation in the broader modeling of race-relations by the Chicago School. *Native Son* also follows canonical sociological theory on this more symbolic level, the Black Belt offered as evidence by Wright, and by Bigger's defense lawyer in the novel, as the determining environment of his criminal behavior. What defines his typical delinquency is Bigger's failure to navigate Burgess's zonal metropolis.

However, there is also evidence in the narrative that *Native Son* does not rotely repeat Chicago School lessons in sociology and geography. Bigger has his own somatic apprehension of the space of the city in the novel, one that does not align with the official maps, but is nonetheless a form of intimate black perception of urban space. In the first section of the book, he tours Jan and Mary around the South Side, correcting their presumed knowledge of the Black Belt. Moreover, his experiences in the Dalton neighborhood and household do not follow progressive liberal arguments about the positive influence of such environments, a social scientific theory of racialized space that underwrites the decision in *Brown v. Board*. Wright's ambivalence in *Native Son* might be explained, following Jeff Allred's reading of the author's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), as a "bifocal vision" that "incorporates snail's eye and bird's eye views,

combining embodied itineraries with abstract maps" (566).[37] The Chicago School abstractions of race-relations and urban space are clearly present in *Native Son*, particularly in the language of the progressive liberals and their misguided attempts to help Bigger, though also in the language of the news media that aids in his capture. But throughout the novel, the protagonist attempts to elude his identifiability and locatability within the canonical sociological map of Chicago's Black Belt, quite literally during the climactic chase scenes of Book II. This double cartographic consciousness remains unresolved in *Native Son*, another of the blindnesses that Wright catalogs in his first novel. But these fissures in the sociological narrative of *Native Son* develop into full ruptures in Wright's final novel, *A Father's Law*, in which Wright's cartographic realism is unsettled and the author explores the limits of the map-maker's transcendence of space.

In Chapter 2, "The Cartographic Violence of *A Father's Law*," I investigate the conflict between two contradictory figures of social scientific professionalization in Wright's posthumously-published novel: the sociologist as policeman and the sociologist as criminal. Ruddy Turner's achievement as the first African American police chief in Chicago is figured as a social scientific mastery of urban space. Personally, he has navigated the stages and zones of Chicago School theory to become an upwardly-, or in Ernest Burgess's schematic, outwardly-, mobile, suburban homeowner. Professionally, he manages his fellow citizens according to the same sociological laws, protecting the rights of homeowners, controlling crowds, and arresting criminals. The naturalized criminality of Wright's "native son" has thus been transformed in *A Father's Law* into legalized citizenship and legislative authority. Ruddy's son Tommy, an actual student of sociology at the University of Chicago but also a suspected serial killer, ironically deforms his

[37] As he acknowledges in a footnote, Allred is drawing on Michel de Certeau distinction between itineraries and maps (581-2 n.22). See de Certeau 120.

father's model of social scientific mastery.[38] As Wright makes clear, Tommy's training as a professional sociologist involves the mapping of the city along the lines that Burgess and his students practiced. Moreover, the object of the young sociology scholar's research is the pathology of inner-city African American culture. As a serial killer, though, his body count evidences the sociopathy of the same discipline, a perverse expression of the statistical conception of bodies and spaces institutionalized in canonical sociology. The very ordering process of sociological imagination is dangerously reproduced by the mind of the serial killer, a grotesquely integrated figure in the social order. Tommy's serial murders, moreover, project this ordered disorder on to the space of the city destabilizing the coherency of the canonical sociological cartography. In his final novel, Wright unmaps the cartographic project of early US sociology, specifically Burgess's concentric circle diagram, but also the canonical sociological narratives of pathology and assimilation.

Unlike *Native Son*, *A Father's Law* is a distinctly unmappable text; the novel is cartographically unrealistic in its reference to specific places. The difficulty in reading the geography of the novel, its spatial incoherence, is one of the vehicles through which Wright critiques the dominant paradigms of Chicago School sociology. While the narrative of *A Father's Law* continues to register the racial meanings of physical locations, these lines are increasingly blurred, as is the broader cultural landscape of Chicago School sociology. Even in its broadest lines, the Chicago School map of the city, Burgess's conception of concentric circles spiraling outward from the inner city, is rendered markedly unstable by the fictional landscape of *A Father's Law*. The physical and cultural movement of assimilation zoned by Burgess to the periphery does not

[38] For Houston Baker, there are two forms of African American engagement with what he calls "black modernism": the "mastery of form," embodied by Booker T. Washington and the "deformation of mastery," embodied by W.E.B. Du Bois. See *Black Atlantic Modernism*.

account for the deviance of the college student-serial killer Tommy Turner. In *A Father's Law*, then, Wright inverts a central racialized spatial logic of canonical sociology: that criminality originates at the city center, in the immigrant and migrant ghettos. Thus the regionality or districting of vice and deviance as drawn both by police and sociologists is unsettled in the novel. As the tangled detective plot of *A Father's Law* reveals, Burgess's zonal model of the modern metropolis opened a route out of the inner city for the socially mobile, but it also fixed the inner city itself as a racialized space on to which sociologists mapped conceptions of nonnormativity. In spite of the cultural turn of the Chicago School, the violence of their cartographic imagination was in their ecological preservation of blackness, black spaces and black bodies, as pathological. In his final novel, then, Wright is less concerned with cartography than with geographic epistemology, less with how to map race relations, than with what information such maps claim to provide. The fact that *A Father's Law* focuses on the anomaly of a serial killer, instead of statistically evident crimes of the juvenile delinquent, is itself indicative of this shift from sociological realism to an almost postmodern response to the imminent post-racial crisis in black politics.[39]

[39] That is, what, in the allegedly post-racial moment of the post-civil rights era, is blackness exactly? For William Julius Wilson, as the title of his *The Declining Significance of Race* suggests, argues that class has superseded race in importance in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Cornel West, on the other hand, insists that *Race Matters* in his book of the same title.

Chapter 1

Unmapping Race Relations in the "Modern Authority" of *Native Son*

From Cycles to Zones: The Anatomo-Politics of Chicago School Cartography

> A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.
>
> - Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (93)

Ernest Burgess famously mapped the race-relations cycle on to a universalized model of urban space in his 1925 "The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project." He figured the progressive stages as geographic "zones," a series of concentric circles radiating outward from the inner city. Outside the central business district was the "zone of deterioration" with its "submerged regions of poverty, degradation, and disease, and their underworlds of crime and vice" (55). For Burgess, this was a distinctly racialized area, "overflowing with immigrant colonies—the Ghetto, Little Sicily, Greektown, Chinatown" and "the Black Belt, with its free and disorderly life" (56). The "deterioration" of these geographic areas was measured by the "rough indexes of social disorganization" such as "disease, crime, disorder, vice, insanity, and suicide," though later researchers would map additional data to Burgess's circular zones, including such social phenomena as juvenile delinquency, professional occupation, and family structure (57). The next zone was a working class zone, "an area of second immigrant settlement," "the region of escape from the slum." Still further from center, "Residential" and "Commuters" zones related to higher degrees of assimilation into the cosmopolitan cityscape. In "The Growth of the City," urban space was defined by its expansive movement, the movement of immigrants and migrants to and through the city, and Burgess's map encompassed this contemporary dynamic. The concentric circle model not only schematized racial and economic demographics in the city, then, it visualized the process of race relations itself. Moving outward from the inner city, the zones became increasingly "organized" or assimilated, as second-generation immigrants expanded into

suburban areas and Americanized.[40] Burgess's concentric circle model of modern metropolitan growth, and early American sociology in general, worked against the dangerous social disorganization of the city through mapping and other ordering devices.

More than any other sociologist at the time, it was a black doctoral student at the University of Chicago, E. Franklin Frazier, who applied Chicago School paradigms to the specific context of African American experiences of migration and urbanization in the US beginning with his dissertation, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1931), later published as *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939).[41] In his "Editor's Preface" for the publication, Burgess followed the ethnicity paradigm arguing that the "Negro" migrants to the city were like those of European origin, but he noted, "The chief difference is that for the Negro family and individual Negroes the problems of poverty, bad housing, high rents, communicable disease, illegitimacy, promiscuity, prostitution, gambling, juvenile delinquency, and adult crime are frequently…*intensified*" (xvii, my emphasis). In a section of *The Negro Family in the United States* entitled "In the City of Destruction," Frazier found order in the "bewildering spectacle" of the Black Metropolis by mapping such indices of disorganization onto a revised version of Burgess's concentric circle schematic zoomed in on African American neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side and

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[40] "Social disorganization" theory was central to Chicago School sociology, beginning with William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki canonical study of immigration in their *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. University of Chicago sociology graduate students Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D McKay would later further develop the theory in their writings on juvenile delinquency. For a critical overview of the influence of social disorganization theory in criminology, see Robert J. Bursik, Jr, "Social Disorganization and Theories of Crime and Delinquency: Problems and Prospects." More recent sociological studies have begun to reimagine the concept of social disorganization. Rogue sociologist Sudyir Venkatesh, for example, looks at the informal business dealings of the inner-city residents of Marquis Park in Chicago in his *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (2008). For Venkatesh, what might appear to mainstream America through a popular sociological lens as "disorganized" or abnormal behavior is in fact a complicated network of relationships.

[41] Wright was very familiar with Frazier's research, citing him in his "Introduction" to *Black Metropolis*, and writing a "Foreward" to Frazier's essay "Human, All Too Human," in a 1949 issue of *Présence Africaine*. See Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books & Writers* 56.

in New York City's Harlem (298). He maps the dysfunctionality of African American families from inner city outward. The more peripherally-located households were more stable according to Frazier's research; such organization was indicated by higher rates of literacy, professional employment, marriage, property-ownership, and mulattoes.[42] The corresponding disorganization evident in the single-parent, female-headed household of the Thomas family in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and in Bigger's lack of employment and gang involvement, was typical of the slums at the city center according to Frazier's maps.

For Burgess, there was an ethical relationship between neighborhoods and their inhabitants as the spatial expansion of the city proliferated both "personality types," like the juvenile delinquent, and "types of areas," like the Black Belt (53, 50). In his essay on "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment," Robert Park writes that "the city possesses a moral as well as a physical organization, and these two mutually interact to mold and modify each other" (4). Park elaborates later on this theory of environmental determinism in relation to vice districts: "Every neighborhood, under the influences which tend to distribute and segregate city populations, may assume the character of a 'moral region'" (43). The conception of moral regions in early American urban sociology was merely descriptive. It necessitated a theoretical corollary that explained the process by which vice districts were constructed. Building on his concept of moral regions later in "The City," Park writes of the concept of "social contagion":

> What lends special importance to the segregation of the poor, the vicious, the criminal, and exceptional persons generally, which is so characteristic a feature of city life, is the fact that *social contagion* tends to stimulate in divergent types the

[42] For Frazier's application of the Burgess model, see *The Negro Family in the United States* 300-24.

> common temperamental differences, and to suppress characters which unite them with normal types about them. (45, my emphasis)

Though the Chicago School is known for its supposed break with biological conceptions of culture, Park here borrows from the natural sciences in two ways. Not only does he structure cultural formation on the bacteriological process of spreading disease, but he further suggests that deviance may in fact be a kind of latent gene expressed through environmental exposure. As Park and Burgess mapped out what would become the dominant methods and theories of urban sociology and the sociology of race, then, they closely linked the formation of both normative and divergent types with specific social environments. The fixity of this pathological conception of space and identity contradicted the apparent dynamism of the race-relations cycle.

For Henry Yu, the Chicago School's cartographic imagination was critical in their shift from biological to cultural understandings of race. "Despite the exclusively social origins of cultural difference," Yu writes, "sociologists visualized such differences in the form of maps and other spatial diagrams" (47). Thus, as Yu argues, the spatialization of race reintroduced an illusory physicality to its study not unlike biological conceptions:

> The metaphorical linking of racial identity and physical location was a road that went both ways. It gave rise on the one side to notions of place that were highly racialized, and on the other to notions of ethnic, racial, and cultural identity that adopted tangible, physical features of the land. (54)

Not only did Burgess moralize and racialize urban space in his zonal schematic, but he also envisioned "the growth of the city" in specifically anatomical terms, "analogous to the anabolic and katabolic processes of metabolism in the body" (53). As an example of the "disturbances of metabolism" experienced in the modern metropolis, Burgess offers African American migration from the rural South, which he argues upset the normal "social metabolism" of the city (54). Bigger's road to juvenile delinquency can be mapped and explained through Chicago School theory as the result of the disorganizing

effects of migration. In this canonical sociological reading, the juvenile delinquent's pathological behavior, and the pathologies of the Black Belt more broadly, are naturalized as part of the life of the city, albeit as symptoms of the diseased state of the social body.

In *Native Son*, the metaphorical link between race and place is evident in the narrative's apparent sharp adherence to Burgess's zoning, particularly to the "line" on Cottage Grove Avenue that Bigger and Gus refer to early on in the novel, which segregates the South Side (21). Indeed, if we focus in on the geographic coordinates of the protagonists at the openings of both Wright's first and final novels, we can map the narratives within Burgess's concentric circle model. The "disorder" of the opening scene of *Native Son*, in which a rat terrorizes the Thomas family's kitchenette apartment, authorizes the narrative that follows with a cartographic and sociological realism. Not only can we locate "3721 Indiana Avenue" on the Chicago grid, but we can locate it within the historically African American neighborhoods of the South Side (48).[43] Moreover, the kitchenette scenes, and Wright's descriptions of the Black Belt throughout the novel, emphasize the determining effect of Bigger's environment, the "zone of deterioration." Wright's most famous protagonist thus emerges as one of the pathological types of modern urban personality that fascinated Chicago School sociologists: the juvenile delinquent. *A Father's Law* opens in the wealthy white suburb where the successful black civil servant has relocated his family. Wright's final novel then might be read as completing the race-relations cycle not only generationally but also cartographically. Ruddy and his family appear to have made it "out" to what Burgess termed the "restricted residential district" at the outskirts of the city (55).

[43] As part of the 2010 NEH Summer Institute, I have mapped Wright's novel in Google Maps and Google Earth. The results are available at the Institute website, "Making the Wright Connection: An Online Community for the Study of Richard Wright."

For Burgess, Park, and other Chicago School sociologists, migration was the primary mechanism of the modern city. Their maps, while acknowledging this migration, were an attempt to somehow manage it, theoretically, schematically, and indeed pragmatically, to create what Michael de Certeau calls in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), "the planned and readable city." Their scientific expertise in the early twentieth century age of professionalism was contingent on their ability to do so. Above all, Burgess's map is a monument to the ambition of early US sociologists to make a still life of the troubling dynamism of modern urban space, to arrest the landscape in panoramic perspective. As a young migrant from the South, Richard Wright was attracted to the realizing potential of Chicago School urban sociology for similar reasons: to make sense of the confusing new space of the Northern city. As a sociological fiction, Wright's *Native Son* seems at first to corroborate the official panoramic vision, a view that contains both the decadence and triumph of citizenship in the cosmopolitan metropolis. Bigger's movements within the novel, though, and his movement between an embodied intersubjective knowledge of the city and the modern canonical sociological conception of urban space, make this view of the skyline a blinkered one. When we read Wright's first novel against the maps and other texts of the Chicago School, to continue borrowing de Certeau's words, "a migrational, or metaphorical, city…slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (93). While *A Father's Law* will turn Burgess's map completely inside out, my resistant reading of Wright's first novel demonstrates that even at the beginning of his literary career, Wright was already reimagining the canonical cartography of race. This reimagining of the sociological conception of urban space complicates even the story that Wright himself told about his own migration and authorship.

From the Pathological to the Professional: Fiction Writer as Sociologist

> I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me.
>
> - Richard Wright, Introduction to *Black Metropolis* (xix)

Richard Wright's first experiences of the city as a migrant to Chicago in the 1930s resisted the coherency of objective representation. As he writes in the opening pages of the urban section of his autobiography, "The Horror and the Glory":

> My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an *unreal city* whose mythical houses were built of slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of gray smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie." (261, my emphasis)

This is the migrant's city, unsettled and unsettling in "sinking houses," a place experienced as movement, not the static city of official maps. Wright's perception of the urban space as "unreal" echoes what Amy Kaplan has argued was one of the primary anxieties of late-nineteenth-century realism: the extreme otherness of the increasingly multicultural metropolis (44). As I discuss above, these anxieties were shared by early US sociologists at the beginning of the twentieth century, and they worked to realize the city, to make it legible and visible, through their research and writing. But Wright's unreal city is at once the result of the perception of otherness and the experience of otherness itself. Because of segregation, the "glories" of the modern city were not in fact open to all; the "fantasy" of the Promised Land was news to migrants like Wright who had followed the "mythical" accounts of papers like the *Chicago Defender* north. As one who would be labeled "other," one of the millions of African American rural migrants to the urban North in the first half of the twentieth century, whose very presence disrupted

the coherency of urban space for early sociologists, Wright at first experienced the city and his own dreams as unrealizable.

For Robert Park, this feeling of the "unreality" of the city was typical of the experience of migration and was, moreover, determining of pathological behavior. According to the sociologist, juvenile delinquency in African Americans in particular was a result of the "disorganizing" and "demoralizing" migration of rural blacks from the South to Northern cities like Chicago, thus affirming both Wright's personal experience as a migrant and the sociological narrative of his best-selling first novel, itself a story of migration and the disorienting affects of the urban environment. As Park writes in "Community Organization and Juvenile Delinquency," "The enormous amount of delinquency, juvenile and adult, that exists today in the Negro communities in northern cities is due in part, though not entirely, to the fact that migrants are not able to accommodate themselves to a new and relatively strange environment" (108). What distinguishes the juvenile delinquent, then, is their urban illiteracy, their inability to read and thus realize the city. This evolutionary explanation for juvenile delinquency makes it an eminently mappable phenomenon, one that can be located distinctly on Burgess's zonal model, as early criminologists did.[44] The delinquent is then also defined by a lack

[44] The study of juvenile delinquency was one of the major areas in which Chicago School social scientists extended their influence beyond the boundaries of disciplinary sociology. Like other modern types, the juvenile delinquent was a product of his environment. This is the argument that Ernest Burgess made in his first published article, "Juvenile Delinquency in a Small City" (1916), in which he demonstrated the primary "influence of the home, the neighborhood, and the geographic environment" on the pathological type through and early version of this zonal scheme (726). It was University of Chicago graduate students, Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay, though, who applied and extended Burgess's cartographic model in what would become the seminal text on the subject, their *Social Factors in Juvenile Delinquency* (1931). Their maps showed that the concentration of the juvenile delinquency, and other forms of sociologically pathological behavior, was higher in the inner-city zones, while crime rates declined toward the suburban periphery. For more on the study of juvenile delinquency at University of Chicago at this time, see Bulmer 123-25.

of movement; he is tethered in place. By contrast, Wright would describe his authorship in terms of realizing the city through the social sciences.

In his autobiography, *Long Old Road* (1963), Horace Cayton, then a research assistant to University of Chicago professor of sociology Louis Wirth, gives an account of first meeting Richard Wright and sharing with the author his files on the city's Black Belt.[45] Though omitting the details of the moment itself in his own autobiography, *Black Boy/American Hunger* (1944; 1977), Wright alludes to the shared resources in describing the influence of Chicago School urban sociology on his fiction: "I studied tables of figures relating population density to insanity, relating housing to disease, relating school and recreational opportunities to crime, relating various forms of neurotic behavior to environment, relating racial insecurities to the conflicts between whites and blacks" (278).[46] According to this narrative, Wright's conception of urban space and race relations derived directly from sociological "figures," schema like Burgess's concentric circle model and other Chicago School data, that "related" environmental factors like "population density," "housing," and educational opportunity to typical pathological behavior. What such figures codified was the popular rhetorical relationship between "type" and "environment" that was formalized in the institutionalization of early US sociology at the University of Chicago. The use of the typological method was first and

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[45] See Cayton, *Long Old Road* 247-48.

[46] The publishing history of Wright's autobiography is worth note here. The full text of his manuscript, entitled *American Hunger*, which not only detailed his upbringing under Jim Crow, but also included the author's disillusionment with the urban North, was cut down for its original publication and renamed *Black Boy*. Rowley gives a brief account of Dorothy Canefield Fisher and the Book-of-the-Month Club's roles in these changes. See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* 285-91. Fabre was instrumental in publishing the expurgated section of the autobiography separately under the original title of *American Hunger* in 1977. The notation I use above references the restored edition. For more on the politics of publishing *Black Boy/American Hunger*, see "The Metamorphosis of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*" by Janice Thaddeus, *American Literature* 57.2: 199-214. Jeff Karem also discusses the implications of these editorial decisions in his chapter on Wright in *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures* (2004).

foremost to make sense of the dizzying and possibly dangerous diversity of the modern metropolis. Reduced numerically to a series of recurring types, and reduced in terms of production to social context, this diversity appeared easier to manage. It was through the typological method that Wright trained his eye for the city. From the same statistical relationship between identity and place, Wright composed his own story, told in his autobiography, and authored the first best-selling African American novel.

Wright's informal professionalization in the Chicago School of Sociology, discussed by both his contemporaries and later critics, remains most eloquently stated by the author himself.[47] He writes of the influences of the social sciences in the introduction for *Black Metropolis*:

> I felt those extremes of possibility, death and hope, while I lived half hungry and afraid in a city to which I had fled with the dumb yearning to write, to tell my story. *But I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me*. I encountered the work of men who were studying the Negro community, amassing facts about urban Negro life, and I found that sincere art and honest science were not far apart, that each could enrich the other. (xix-xx, my emphasis)

Once again, the author cites the literary inspiration of both overarching sociological theories and data relating specifically to the African American community in Chicago. But here he gives a further account of how transformative this sociological knowledge was for an aspiring writer. Wright recalls his unsettling experiences as a typical migrant, "battered" and shaped by the unrealized "environment" of the urban North. Through social scientific data, though, the author objectified his "feelings" as "facts" and, as he says, "discovered the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me." Not

[47] Michel Fabre further recounts that the young writer was given a reading list in the social sciences by Louis Wirth, a curriculum suitable for a second year sociology major, and that Wright apparently returned several times to discuss his readings in the social sciences with the professor. See *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* 232.

only does Wright explain that it was social scientific "fact" that finally helped him articulate his otherwise "dumb" experience in narrative form, but his description here of his aesthetic rise to consciousness as a writer itself conforms to sociological idea of expertise.

The figure of the sociologist was structured in opposition to both type and environment, as a technocratic expert who could not only scientifically identify the social forces that operate on the individual, but administer them as well. Robert Park seemed to recognize Wright's professional exceptionalism in their only face-to-face meeting in 1941, when the aged professor is reported to have approached the young author and exclaimed, "How the hell did you happen?" (Rowley 250). Christopher Douglas reads in this encounter the refutation of Chicago School sociology embodied in Wright; what surprises the seventy-seven year old Park is the atypicality of black novelist, how he has somehow escaped his typological fate. However, "transcendence," as Howard Horwitz refers to the ability of the modern social scientist to rise above their environment, was central to what he calls the "sociological paradigm" (610). If the type was victim of his or her environment, then the sociologist was master of his. Moreover, this mastery was achieved through the technology of the typological method and statistical models of the urban environment, such as Burgess's concentric circle figure. Wright describes his own coming of age as an artist in just such transcendent, technocratic terms. Park should not have puzzled at Wright as the best-selling black author embodied both the model of sociological expertise and the assimilative logic of the race-relations cycle. That the liberal sociologist was troubled by the "negro" writer suggests something about the limits

of his own progressivism, a limit experienced personally by professionalizing sociologists of color.[48]

Given the history of reciprocal citation between Wright and the Chicago School, for the most part scholars have viewed Wright's connection to canonical sociology as straight-forward: social scientific data and theories provided him with a framework for his fictions and, particularly, a perspective that could transform the often confusing landscapes of the inner city into a widely-accessible panorama. Carla Cappetti, for example, in her *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (1993), argues that Wright made himself into a sociological type in his two-part memoir, *Black Boy/American Hunger*, as "literary autobiography and sociological case study" (198). Even in its simplest geographic trajectory, Wright's life story corroborates canonical sociological narratives, themselves based on "life histories" collected by Chicago School researchers of other rural blacks who, like the author, had migrated to urban North in the early twentieth century. His autobiography further evidences the social disorganization resulting from this geographic and cultural transition, repeatedly foregrounding the conflict between "personality" and "environment." This theme was borrowed from William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's canonical work of American sociology, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* in which the conflict between the individual and their environment was the major drama and structuring device. By the end of *Black Boy-American Hunger*, Wright has transformed from a type himself into a sociologist, literally recording the typical stories of other African American migrants to Chicago, as he does with some of his black comrades in the Communist Party. Indeed, Wright drafted an annotated bibliography of University of Chicago scholarship on the Black Belt as part of

[48] While Du Bois's professional struggles partially support this claim, Henry Yu has extensively discussed the experiences of Asian American sociologists trained at Chicago in this regard in his *Thinking Orientals*.

the Federal Writers' Project American Guide Series on Illinois.[49] As Cappetti observes, Wright "became the sociologist of his own life" (209). The story of Bigger Thomas would be his most famous social scientific narrative, a "fictional case study," as the 1950 Truman report cited the novel.

Even as early as the introduction to the first edition of the novel, Bigger Thomas is imagined as the case study of a classic Chicago School type: the juvenile delinquent. In the 1940 introduction to the Harper edition, Dorothy Canefield Fisher cites Owen D. Young's National Commission, which reported on "conclusive evidence that large percentages of Negro youth by virtue of their combined handicap of racial barriers and low social economic position subtly reflect in their personality traits minor and major distortions or deficiencies which compound their problem of personality adjustment in American society" (Qtd. in Jack). Readers were thus instructed to understand Bigger's dysfunction not only as the result of the disorganizing influence of urbanization on the migrant peasant generally, but specifically as evidence of the pathological effect of racial inequality. Even at the time of its publication, fifteen years before *Brown*, the novel was offered as a sociological argument against segregation with Fisher's statistical citation of the pathological effect of "race barriers" in her introduction.

In the essay, "How 'Bigger' Was Born" that preceded later editions of *Native Son*, Wright uses the sociological rhetoric of type and environment to explain the delinquency of his most famous protagonist. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," the author describes his protagonist as a sociological type based on his own informal observations living within the black community: "there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I

[49] Though the rich material gathered for the Chicago guide was not published at the time, it is available at the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of the Chicago Public Library.

could count" (434).[50] There is no "glee" in Wright's counting of Bigger Thomases in his informal Jim Crow fieldwork, as there was for Du Bois's Southern white sociologists "counting bastards," but nonetheless the author is counting and accounting for persons in the same way that Seltzer argues realists constructed "statistical persons." Wright goes on to outline a series of case studies, different "Biggers" who the author observed throughout his life, emphasizing the recurrent typicality of his main character. The author then turns to "account for the nature of the environment that produced these men" (437). Recalling his own first experiences as a rural migrant to the urban North, the author writes that the city's "physical aspect—noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment—did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous" (442). He reminds readers that his own biography closely mirrored that of his protagonist—both moved from Mississippi to Chicago during the Great Black Migration. While Bigger seems to be only able to react to his environment, Wright is eventually able to act, to develop the sociological consciousness necessary to navigate the city as an individual. The author offers the writing of the sociological fiction as a sublimation for the same anxieties to which Bigger responded so violently.[51] Like sociologists of race, then, Wright's professional literary success, was founded on the creation of the pathological type, which Bigger Thomas embodies. His study of the nascent science of society enabled Wright to tell his own story and that of the Bigger Thomases he encountered but also empowered him to transcend his environment.

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[50] Of course, it was just such accounting that James Baldwin critiqued in his famous essay on *Native Son*: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its *insistence on its categorization alone that is real and which cannot be transcended*" (23, my emphasis).

[51] In his introduction to the "own story" of the juvenile delinquent "Stanley," Clifford Shaw offers that the value of the life history for the narrator himself can be therapeutic as "social treatment" (1).

Wright's self-transformation into a sociologist might be understood as a form of authorization, or, as Cynthia Tolentino argues, professionalization.[52] Though Tolentino reads Wright as critical of canonical sociology, she acknowledges that his relationship with the Chicago School was highly fraught. As she writes in *America's Experts: Race and the Fictions of Sociology* (2009), "Wright sought to critique sociology's hold on African American writing, yet he also drew on its objective status and institutional presence to legitimate his own creative work" (7). For Tolentino, the discourses of professionalization, both within canonical sociology and the cultures of US imperialism more broadly, imagined a pedagogical process through which model minorities could be integrated into American democracy. She thus links professionalization to the progressive narratives of the Chicago School race-relations cycle and the sociological jurisprudence of *Brown v. Board*.[53] In short, professionalization figures as the opposite of pathologization, and as a means for the African American author to move from object to subject of sociological knowledge production. In *America's Experts*, Tolentino writes, "this tension between pathologized unassimilable object and model minority subject…provides a lens through which to examine the positionings of intellectuals of

[52] Wright's turn to the social sciences might be contextualized within the long history of demand for authentication within African American literature, beginning with the questioning of Phyllis Wheatley's authorship and running through patronizing white amanuensis of the slave narratives. This is a history that, I argue, continues today through what I have called the sociological imperative for black fiction. Such circuits of legitimization run through each of Wright's first three major publications. Attention to the publishing history of his works, his unpublished works, and the paratextual details of various editions of Wright's novels and biographies., is instructive in the popularization of black literature in the middle of the twentieth century. Wright's highly modernist short story cycle, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), for example, was preceded by the autobiographical essay, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," in its second edition (1940), as if to confirm the evidentiary status of the fictions despite the author's experimental style. The publication of *Black Boy* soon after the success of *Native Son* functioned in a similar way, the author's horrific biography, and his individual struggles against the *environment* of the South, demonstrating how Wright became a bestselling author rather than another Bigger, a type of sociologist rather than a pathological type.

[53] Tolentino uses the citation of Myrdal in *Brown* to substantiate the link between professionalization and the logic of race-relations cycle. It is Myrdal who more directly outlines the assimilationist concept of professionalization. See Tolentino 35.

color as symbols and representatives of racial reform and U.S. democracy" (xv). Tolentino argues that Wright was conscious of his tenuous position as both subject and object of sociological research on the black community, and that he dramatizes this tension in *Native Son*. In the mental instability of the professional black sociologist in *A Father's Law*, Wright further deconstructs this central problem of authorization for the minority writer.

Though Wright describes his own rise to "consciousness" as an author through his research in the social sciences, this literacy at first appears lacking in the character of Bigger Thomas. As Ralph Ellison writes, "Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that" (*Collected* 162). Early in the novel, it is the marked absence of, even resistance to, full consciousness of himself or his surroundings that accounts for Bigger's juvenile delinquency. As Wright narrates, "He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair…He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (10). In one reading, then, *Native Son* moves from the violent expression of Bigger's inarticulate rage, typologically representative of the pathology of modern African American urban experience, to the sociological, almost pedagogical, explanation of this violence and anger in Max's defense of Bigger. Max places Bigger's crimes within the broader context of African American history from slavery through the Great Migration; for him, the continued racial oppression that is the daily experience of blacks in Chicago is to blame for the murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears. Though Wright tells the reader that Bigger understands little of Max's speech, the lawyer eloquently describes the "cramped limits" of Bigger's life in the Thomases' Black Belt kitchenette and emphasizes that "the background of this

boy must be shown, a background which has acted powerfully and importantly upon his conduct" (388). The emphasis of Max's defense then is on environmental determinism, one mapped cartographically throughout the novel. Yet a resistant reading of Wright's first novel can locate ambivalences in this canonical sociological fiction and possibly even begin to articulate alternative literacies for reading race and reading the city.

Mapping and Unmapping Bigger Thomas: The Cartographic Realism of *Native Son*

> For every adjective which Wright used we have a label, for every move that Bigger took, we have a map; for every personality type he encountered we have a life history.
>
> - Horace Cayton, *The Pittsburgh Courier* (105)

Horace Cayton's The Pittsburgh Courier review of Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, a photographic essay on Chicago's Black Belt that followed the success of *Native Son*—is a remarkable statement about the sociological professionalization of the fiction-writer, the typicality of Bigger Thomas, and the mappability of Wright's best-selling novel. Cayton acknowledges the unofficial relationship between the University of Chicago Department of Sociology and Richard Wright, and also establishes a formal connection between literary and sociological knowledge production. As the social scientist argues, the character of Bigger is a sociological "type," that is, a recurring and easily identifiable figure confirmed by contemporary sociological research on the urban landscape. Moreover, his actions in the novel seem a consequence of that landscape, his movements, his fate, determined by the nature of his environment. The plot and themes of *Native Son*, though, only partially intersect with the cultural landscape of urban space outlined by Ernest Burgess in his "The Growth of the City" and schematized in his concentric circle map of the modern metropolis. The distance between inner and outer

zones of the city does provide one of the major tensions in the novel, as Bigger moves back and forth from his kitchenette apartment on the South Side and the Dalton home in Hyde Park. In Book I in particular, the correlation of Bigger's "every move" with sociological data parallels the centrality of cartography to the Chicago School of Sociology, its obsession with mapping both the physical and psychological spaces of the city. But throughout *Native Son*, Bigger also seems to struggle against his own mappability within the cartographic framework of canonical sociology, attempting to elude his formation as an object of study.

No doubt the alarming opening scene of Wright's best-seller is meant to evoke the harsh surroundings of the "zone of deterioration" that have shaped the personality of Bigger Thomas, particularly the extreme deprivation and exploitation of the South Side tenements. The Chicago kitchenettes, like the tenements of the Lower East Side in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, are "nurseries of crime" (59). The Thomases are a single-family household located just where they should be according to Burgess's and Frazier's concentric circle models. The determining effects of environment are more broadly structured in *Native Son* through the author's attention to the actual cartography of the city of Chicago in his novel. Though Wright wrote in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" that Chicago was an "indescribable city," the narrative of *Native Son* at first appears easily mappable on to the grid of the Midwestern metropolis (453). It is full of real place names with historic and cultural significance. As Cayton suggests in his review, one can trace Bigger's route from his Black Belt kitchenette at "3721 Indiana Avenue," across the "line" at Cottage Grove Avenue, to the Hyde Park home of the Dalton's at "4605 South Boulevard" (48, 21, 32).[54] Wright's cartographic realism evidences his informal

[54] Neville Hoad first suggested this idea of literally mapping Bigger's moves; as part of a core course at the University of Chicago, he led students on a walking tour from 3721 Indiana Avenue to 4605 South Drexel Boulevard.

sociological training. Moreover, this cartographic knowledge contrasts sharply with his protagonist's often confused experience of the city. For Bigger, the city is at times undescribable, evidencing the juvenile delinquent's urban illiteracy. As he reflects "Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a *strange labyrinth* even when the streets were straight and the walls were square; a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it, divide it, focus it" (240, my emphasis). It is this "chaos" of the city that Burgess's map "divides" and "focuses" expertly. The seeming volatility of the grid in Bigger's mind, though, is evidence of his typicality.

Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, which cites Chicago School research in its Preface, directly confronts the problem of the Black Belt kitchenettes (xxi). In that work, the author outlines in detail the racist real estate practices that constructed de facto segregation in northern cities and through which the "Bosses of the Buildings," like Mr. Dalton in *Native Son*, exploited African American migrants to Chicago. Moreover, in the "Death on the City Pavements" section of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright follows canonical sociology in accounting for inner-city pathologies ecologically: "The kitchenette throws desperate and unhappy people unto an unbearable closeness of association, thereby increasing latent friction, giving birth to never-ending quarrels of recrimination, accusation, and vindictiveness, producing warped personalities" (108). The passage could describe the Thomas family kitchenette and the "unbearable closeness" of their lack of privacy in the first pages of the book, as Bigger and his brother turn their heads to allow his mother and sister dress. In *Native Son*, Bigger often appears to simply be a natural product of his environment, the buildings themselves the active agents in the physical and cultural landscape of the modern city. But, following Jeff Allred's resistant reading of *12 Million Black Voices*, the photographic essay can be read ironically as

challenging the transparency of African American experience. As Allred argues, the narrative "we" of Wright's text deforms the invisible subjectivity—the "professionally-authorized eye-I"—claimed in sociological conceptions of urban space, and attempts to speak for the objectified and ecologically-determined folk (569). In *Native Son*, Bigger also resists his incorporation into a panoramic view of urban space that frames his own existence as typical and pathological, even if he cannot yet articulate an alternative, collective social science, as Allred argues that Wright does in *12 Million Black Voices*. While Wright was clearly invested in exposing the realities of Black Belt housing conditions, there is conflict within *Native Son* as to the meaning of the kitchenette. This conflict over the meaning of the black home and black spaces arises in the novel when Mary expresses her desire to see inside the South Side tenements.

When Jan and Mary ask Bigger to give them a tour of the South Side, the Communist takes the wheel, denying the chauffer any agency in guiding them around his own neighborhood. Jan asks Bigger to show them a "*real* place," but though he can direct them to Ernie's Kitchen Shack at Forty-seventh Street and Indiana, it is not his Ernie's when he is accompanied by the two young whites slumming it in the Black Belt (69, emphasis original). Jan and Mary place Bigger's South Side in a sociological frame the intent of which is to produce "real" racialized knowledge. Thus, though they are truant to their original destination, the University of Chicago, their ethnographic expedition to the South Side follows the interests of Chicago School social scientists in the black community surrounding the campus. It is during this tour that Jan and Mary, like sociologists, interview Bigger and learn of his life history as a migrant. It is also during these scenes that Bigger's first urges to kill Mary arise. His violent thoughts are described immediately after she expresses a progressive, settlement-house interest in observing how African American folk in the Black Belt of Chicago live. As Mary laments:

> You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into these houses…and just see how your people live. You know what I mean?…We know so little about each other. I just want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home…There are twelve million of them…They live in our country…In the same city with us. (69-70)

Given the opening scene in which Bigger kills the rat in the Thomas kitchenette, Mary's romantic desire to see a black apartment does seem somewhat absurd. In the next paragraph, Wright has Bigger imagine murdering the young college student: "Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—with himself and them inside" (70). The extra-cartographic description here, Bigger imagining himself in a "naked," unmapped, transcendent space, signals a resistance to Mary's assumptions about the mappability of the black home and, more broadly, the knowability of black life.

The false intimacy of Mary's scopophilic desire to see inside a black home is undercut by her tone-death singing of a "sorrow song." Through Jan and Mary's awkward attempts to sing African American spirituals and speak black dialect, Wright mocks early social scientific interest in African American culture. Mary's observation that blacks have "so much emotion," echoes Park's comments about the "Negro" being the "lady of the races" in his 1918 essay on "Education in its Relation to the Conflict and Fusing of Cultures" (*Race and Culture* 280). When a drunken Mary and Jan begin singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Bigger thinks, "Hell, that ain't the tune" (77). That it is the tune that Mary and Jan misread is significant, considering that, in his break with his sociological training in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois would render the African American spirituals illegible precisely to elude such appropriation. Like Du Bois, Wright argues in *Native Son* that black inner city culture is not as transparent as Jan and Mary and Chicago School sociologists presumed. I read the failed anti-racist gestures of

the two privileged white kids in these scenes as Wright's critique of canonical sociology and its liberal social agenda, and the generally confused Bigger seems in on the joke. Clearly, Jan and Mary succeed not in better understanding Bigger, but in further distancing him, indeed, angering him. As in Mary's eventual murder, Bigger is reacting as much to pathological images of blackness than to his own alleged pathology.

Native Son ambivalently registers the logic of Chicago School "figures" like Burgess's concentric circle model. The pathology of the ghetto is evidenced in the early scenes of the novel, in the Thomas family's kitchenette and at Doc's poolroom, where Bigger and his gang hang out. However, the outer city, what Burgess refers to as the "restricted residential district," is not the ameliorative environment assumed by Chicago School theorists. Bigger's misplacement in the "quiet and spacious white neighborhood" of the Daltons is immediately apparent when he first shows up for work:

> The houses he passed were huge; lights glowed softly in windows…This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside. (43-4)

Though Wright depicts Hyde Park here as a version of the 1950's suburban American dream with spacious houses and picket fences, Bigger nonetheless feels "constricted." The possibility of this standard of living is still foreign to the rural migrant. While Bigger's route to the Dalton's house is clearly mapped by Wright in his narrative, there is no apparent pathway for the juvenile delinquent to achieve this lifestyle himself. He doesn't even know how to enter the house and Bigger's discomfort is only intensified once he is within the Dalton home. Read through the lens of Burgess's zones, *Native Son* emphasizes not only the physical but also the cultural "distance" between the Black Belt and this "restricted residential district." As good progressive liberals in the Chicago

School tradition, though, the Daltons are aware of this social inequality and hire the troubled Bigger in the hopes of closing that gap.[55]

If the opening scenes of *Native Son* are meant to convey how the kitchenettes of Chicago have formed Wright's protagonist negatively, the scenes that follow at the Dalton house seem intended to at least set up the potential benefits of a more positive environment for Bigger, a kind of spatial healing. Wright directly references the foundational sociological discourse of type and environment in Bigger's first visit to the Dalton household. Mrs. Dalton urges her husband to hire the boy and put him to work immediately based on her reading of his "case record": "Don't you think it would be a wise procedure to inject him into his new environment at once, so he could get the feel of things?" Here, Mrs. Dalton follows the narrative logic of Burgess's concentric circles: as Bigger moves farther outward and upward from the Black Belt, he will become more integrated into mainstream US society and naturally grow out of his delinquent behavior of the past. She also follows the epidemiological logic of Park's concept of "social contagion" and the psycho-spatial logic of the decision in *Brown*. Apparently, though, Bigger fails to understand the meaning of this discussion, "The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language" (n. 494).[56] Bigger clearly has not achieved the social scientific literacy of the author himself, a signal of his own typology. Nonetheless, Wright does not rehearse this progressive narrative of race relations without irony.

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[55] Beginning in 1949 with the formation of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, the liberal residents made concerted efforts to make the neighborhoods a model of interracial community in response to the large influx of African Americans. See Arnold R. Hirsch *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 135-70.

[56] This passage is excised, though noted, from the "restored text" established by the Library of Congress and in the current Harper's edition. It was, apparently, a later addition to the text.

Though the Dalton household does not have the benevolent, paternalistic effect on Bigger that was hoped for, such was the experience of Green, the previous chauffer. Given the Chicago Schools ethnicity paradigm, it is appropriate that it is the Irish immigrant and servant, Peggy, that relates Green's sociological narrative of assimilation: "The last coloured man that worked for us stayed ten years…His name was Green. He was a good man, too…Oh, he was smart, that Green was. He took a job with the government. Mrs. Dalton made him go to night school." As Peggy describes it, the Dalton home is a place where racial and ethnic others can be informally trained to become members of the municipal bureaucracy and thus integrated as normative citizens. Not only does she offer Green as evidence of the successful completion of the race-relations cycle, but she too is a "model minority" in this regard. Bigger feels "challenged" by Peggy's words and remarks simply: "Yessum, he was smart…And ten years is a long time" (55). While the Burgess model accounted for social mobility, the speed of such changes was critical to the health of the city, betraying something of the conservatism of Chicago School sociology. Patience was, of course, part of what defined the "model minority."[57] Indeed, as Cynthia Tolentino recognizes, there is an understated political consciousness in Bigger's comment about "time" here that suggests something more radical than mere social scientific illiteracy, and perhaps a rejection of Chicago School sociological uplift.

In her reading of Wright's *Native Son*, Tolentino relies largely on scenes like this one in which Bigger's alleged pathology collides with the obvious privilege of the Daltons. As she writes, "the novel brings into focus Bigger's encounters with members of the Dalton household to show how liberalism envisions a professionalizing process for

[57] See Robert G. Lee definition of the "model minority" in *Orientals* 145.

black subjects as it advances black pathology to regulate the inclusionary process for black subjects" (20). For Tolentino, the sociologically-influenced liberal narrative of race relations becomes increasingly incoherent as the novel progresses while at the same time the agency of the pathologized and allegedly environmentally-determined juvenile delinquent emerges. Tolentino reads Bigger's murder of Mary as an angry rejoinder to the sociological arguments deployed by the Daltons throughout *Native Son*. The cartographic perspective on the text that I provide here deepens this argument that Wright was in fact revising sociological conceptions of black personhood and neighborhood in his first novel.

If Bigger's murder of Mary initiates a rise to consciousness, a major part of this new understanding of the world is cartographic in content. As he brags to Bessie of his own knowledge of the city while planning the extortion of the Daltons, "I know the South Side from A to Z" (149). In Book II of *Native Son*, Bigger temporarily evades the authorities by navigating maps printed in newspapers of the search as the police surround the entire Black Belt and close in on Bigger's location. In these extended chase scenes, in which the juvenile delinquent hides out in abandoned kitchenette apartments, Bigger briefly gains a unique perspective on the racialized urban space of the city by exercising a certain sociological literacy. As he reads the newspapers and maps, he also reads the city itself. As Bigger travels through the abandoned buildings of the Black Belt of Chicago—"empty buildings with black windows, like blind eyes, buildings like skeletons standing in the snow on their bones in the winter winds"—he sees the city differently (173). While the newspaper uncritically reports indiscriminate arrests by the police, the fugitive hears two black men complaining "We's all murderers t' them" (251). Wright composed another story on this theme, "The Man Who Lived Underground," that similarly features a fugitive from the law evading capture by hiding out within the infrastructure of the city,

traveling the sewers and eavesdropping on the "aboveground" world in all its absurdity.[58] In both the story and the novel, the protagonists see through the ruined infrastructure of the city into the everyday lives of its citizens to a depth beyond pathological abstraction. In the end of *Native Son*, though, the juvenile delinquent is just a point plotted on the map of the Black Belt—"in that white spot, standing in a room waiting for them to come"—and the authorities eventually overtake him (256). Bigger's alternative cartographic imagination, his metropoetics, cannot elude the totalizing view of the Chicago School's official maps of the city; even as his bodily movements are hypervisible, his own vision remains blinkered.

It is during the chase scene that Bigger recognizes proof of Burgess's theory of expansion as he is hiding out in the abandoned tenements: "Some rich folks lived here once, he thought. Rich white folks. That was the way most houses on the South Side were, ornate, old, stinking; homes once of rich white people, now inhabited by Negroes or standing dark and empty with yawning black windows" (183). His own employer, Mr. Dalton, owner of the South Side Real Estate Company, is complicit with this process of urban decay. As the narrative progresses, Bigger also begins to recognize the economic connection between his family's own impoverished living conditions and the racist real estate practices of Mr. Dalton. He vaguely describes the practice of redlining that perpetuated de facto segregation in northern cities like Chicago: "They keep us bottled up here like wild animals, he thought. He knew that black people could not go outside the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the 'line'" (249). But this account differs slightly from Burgess's naturalization of the economic and social dynamics of the city, evidencing Wright's resistance to the explanatory frameworks of

[58] The story was first published in 1944, but not collected until 1960 as part of *Eight Men*.

canonical sociology. The suffering of these tenements is not the simply the result of the high rate of migration clogging the digestive track of the city. The fact that Bigger is hiding out in unrented apartments refutes the argument that overpopulation has led to the overcrowding of the Black Belt and suggests that the housing shortage is an artificial one. As Gwendolyn Brooks writes of the Chicago kitchenettes, Bigger sees himself as part of the "involuntary plan" (3). It is, however, the sociological jurisprudence of Max's arguments during the trial in the final section of the novel that more fully articulates this point. Directly confronting Mr. Dalton during the inquest, Max asks: "do you think that the terrible conditions under which the Thomas family lived in one of your houses may in some way be related to the death of your daughter?" (328). Yet in Max's rearticulation, Bigger's experience, and the experience of the kitchenette class more broadly, become, like Bessie's body at the inquest, reduced to "evidence," and thus fails to move beyond the pathologization of black spaces and black bodies (331).

No single scene from *Native Son* better exemplifies Wright's complicated relationship with the professionalization of African American pathology than that in which an apparently mentally unstable man is briefly placed in Bigger's cell at the Cook County Jail. Significantly, this scene directly precedes that in which Bigger first starts to grasp the social forces that have so inevitably shaped him. Even as the black inmate is forcibly thrown behind bars, he calls the white policemen, and presumably the entire system of racial oppression, "criminals," thus calling into question the most basic of normative, legal divisions in society. Another prisoner explains to Bigger:

> He went off his nut from studying too much at the university. He was writing a book on how colored people live and he says somebody stole all the facts he'd found. He says he's got to the bottom of why colored people are treated bad and he's going to tell the President and have things changed, see? He's nuts! He swears his university professor had him locked up. (343)

This reference is the clearest, if still indirect, mention of Chicago School sociology in *Native Son*; the "facts" mentioned are clearly the same sort of social scientific data collected by Louis Wirth and Horace Cayton that Wright himself was given access to as a young author. As the man shouts later, "I'll tell 'im you make us live in such crowded conditions on the South Side that one out of ever ten of us is insane…I'll tell 'im the schools are so crowded that they breed perverts" (344). Here the "university professor" is depicted as complicit with a white supremacist conspiracy involving the ivory tower. Later in the novel, University of Chicago social scientists are quoted in a sensationalist newspaper article as corroborating racial stereotypes about black male sexuality. While Wright was aware of, and acknowledgedly inspired by, Chicago School research on black communities, the suggestion here is that something was still lacking in its allegedly progressive approach to African American culture. Though presented as the ravings of the lunatic, these ravings foreshadow the legal arguments made by Max in the courtroom scenes at end of the novel; however, they also foreshadow Bigger's eventual, if partial, rejection of Max's explanatory frameworks for his own experience in the final pages of *Native Son*. The mad scholar, furthermore, anticipates the character of Tommy Turner in *A Father's Law*, a student of sociology and a student of the Black Belt, who similarly ends up in jail. In both cases, African American sociological professionalism, figured as a mastery of urban space in Wright's authorship, and in the research of Frazier and other black social scientists, is confined within the very same prison walls as the object of that research, the juvenile delinquent.

In *Native Son*, Bigger clearly resists the position of pathologized sociological object, but in this scene the subject formation of the black sociologist is also questioned. Using *A Father's Law*, in which Wright more directly addresses this "professionalizing process" in both the black policeman and the black sociologist, I will further explore the

tension Cynthia Tolentino observes between Wright's simultaneous legitimization of his own authorship through social scientific theory and his critical engagement with the discourses of pathology, assimilation, and professionalization in canonical sociology. The serial murders of the sociologist in the later novel are a more pointed critique, as the process of the sociopath are more directly entangled with the violence of the sociological method. The fissures in the sociological narrative of Wright's first novel become ruptures in his final work of fiction, as he realized the contradictions of his own social scientific expertise.

Chapter 2

The Cartographic Violence of *A Father's Law*

"With All Deliberate Speed": Traffic Control and Integration

> Not so long ago, the only time a black man or woman was seen in a public space was with a mop; today black people stride through airports and corporate headquarters carrying briefcases and talking on cellular phones…Perhaps the most visible and important sign of change is the black police officer.
>
> - Noel Ignatiev, Foreword to *12 Million Black Voices* (v)

While *Native Son* opens in the harsh reality of the Thomas kitchenette in the Black Belt, *A Father's Law* begins within a utopian dream of urban space. We never know what Bigger was dreaming before being awoken in *Native Son*—perhaps it is the deferred dream of the Southern migrant. As Gwendolyn Brooks writes in her poem "kitchenette building," "'Dream' makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like 'rent'" (3). But Ruddy Turner, as fits his comfortable middle-class lifestyle and by-the-book character, dreams of traffic patrol: "a white-gloved" traffic cop expertly directing cars in the "exact manner in which the *Metropolitan Handbook for Traffic Policemen* had directed" (1). Ruddy's is an urban dream of highly-managed spatial order and he dreams it in the suburbs. For him, the city is no longer the "strange labyrinth" that it was for Bigger in *Native Son*. While canonical sociology's typical juvenile delinquent is ultimately determined by the inner-city, Ruddy, in his occupational success as a cop, has mastered both himself and his environment. His fantasy of municipal authority in the form of traffic control is at once a dream of personal self-discipline and the disciplining of others. It is a dream of a cosmopolitan man so composed that he can inscribe his bodily order on the space of the city like a traffic cop directing cars at an intersection. Ruddy's dream patrolman in a sense literalizes Burgess's metabolic analogy from "The Growth of the City" as the perfect fusion of the human body with the body polis. Throughout *A Father's Law*, Ruddy is the embodiment of Chicago School sociological theory and its professional extension beyond the academic social sciences from legislating race

relations in *Brown* to modern police enforcement. Despite the dream of order with which the novel begins, however, Wright reveals a darker side to the organizational technologies of canonical sociology, embodied in Ruddy's son, a sociologist and serial killer.

Like both Wright and Bigger, though, Ruddy started off in the Black Belt, arriving as a migrant from the South in the northern city, "young, big, raw, hard, silent" (32). Wright explains that Ruddy experiences a "hidden sense of guilt" for feelings of violent bitterness against white men that have motivated him to be such a successful policeman (35). At one point he describes this bitterness taking the form of another dream in which "he was the head of a black invading army who would conquer a city like Chicago" (34). Ruddy's vision of an African American "invasion" here echoes Ernest Burgess's language describing centrifugal demographic movement in "The Growth of the City," including "Negro" migration and suburbanization. In outlining his basic zonal map, Burgess writes, "This chart brings out clearly the main fact of expansion, namely, the tendency of each inner zone to extend its area by the *invasion* of the next outer zone" (50, my emphasis). Ruddy eventually rises through the ranks of the city police department to become captain, a protector of white property, not an invader, his dream of conquering the city replaced by the dream of managing it through traffic control and other duties of a metropolitan policeman. But even as Ruddy takes his police officer's exam, he "felt more like a criminal himself than a man who was seeking the mandate to track them down" (33). The sociological burden of the pathologized black body, of blackness both corporeal and communal as criminal, weighs heavily on Ruddy's psyche, as it did on Bigger's. After reminiscing about his juvenile feelings of criminality and his successful police career, Ruddy thinks to himself: "All you had to do was master yourself; others could do what he had done. It was easy. And so confident was he that he

could say, with deep satisfaction, when looking at a black man gone wrong: 'There but for *watchfulness*, go I!'" (36, my emphasis). Such inner "watchfulness," or self-control, was part of what distinguished the stereotype of the integrated minority from unassimilable blackness.[59] In at once contrasting and comparing himself to the black criminal, Ruddy expresses a distinctly middle-class African American concern about bourgeois respectability. Though literally a policeman, Ruddy must also police himself in order to maintain his precarious social status.

For Ruddy, there is a direct relationship between his eventual successes as a police officer and his own arrested criminality: "the *containment* of that tension had been his greatest achievement, an achievement greater than his having aided in the capture of Cappy Nelson, greater than his single-handed capture of the gang of silk thieves during the early part of 1934" (35, my emphasis). Ruddy perceives his professional achievement as a police officer less as a result of his arrest record than of the "containment" of a his own latent pathological behavior. In his institutional achievement, then, Ruddy is a Bigger made good; the naturalized criminality of Wright's "native son" is transfigured through *A Father's Law* into legalized and legitimized citizenship. By becoming the law itself, Ruddy is able to control the lawlessness that governed the juvenile delinquent's life. Bigger's racialized estrangement from mainstream US society was expressed pathologically as criminality, whereas Ruddy has sublimated that same alienation and become, just the opposite, a representative of the justice system. After the criminalization of blackness in *Native Son*, Ruddy's officer's uniform in *A Father's Law* acts as a kind of new skin; his police uniform replaces what Robert Park referred to as his "racial uniform" ("Racial Assimilation" 208-9). As Ruddy dresses for a late night meeting with the

[59] See Lee, *Orientals* 145.

commissioner in the early pages of the novel, his interior monologue describes the racial symbolism of his blue police uniform and gun: "His function in society was marked out by it, and even the bronze tint of his skin was redeemed by it…the presence of the service revolver on his hip served to act as an anchor to his threatened personality" (9). This early scene is one of the few mentions of Ruddy's race and is mentioned here only to be dismissed, his blackness displaced by the municipal blue. Moreover, the threatening and "threatened personality" essential to inner-city black experience has been sublimated into the "service" of the state. In reminding twenty-first century readers of the different historical context of Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, Noel Ignatiev offers a brief account of the shifting racial dynamics in the intervening years. For Ignatiev, "the most visible and important sign of change is the black police officer." "In 1940," he continues, "there was not a single black policeman in any Deep South state and only a handful in northern cities; now there are black cops in major cities all over the country, and black police chiefs as well" (v). We need only think of Bigger's relationship with the police and the structural racism of the justice system in *Native Son* to appreciate that *A Father's Law* is a narrative of a very different era. As a symbol of civil rights and civic authority, Ruddy's profession emphasizes the cultural and thus changeable nature of race, and his successful assimilation into mainstream US society, the teleological end of the Chicago School race-relations cycle.[60] Bigger's delinquency was the result of segregation's obstruction to the natural movement of the city, while Ruddy, like the traffic cop, is fully integrated into the flow of modern metropolitan space.

[60] While it is unlikely that a black officer would have been promoted to captain of a white district, it is true that Chicago was a highly progressive city for black police. For more on the history of black police in Chicago, see W. Marvin Dulaney, *Black Police in America* (1996), especially Chapter Three, "The Politics of Tokenism." Chicago was particularly progressive in its treatment of African American police officers, though Dulaney writes "Even in Chicago, the city in which African Americans made the most progress in terms of the number of promotions that they received, their police experience was indicative of the times and of the failure of police reform to address the color line" (23).

The mundanity of Ruddy's dream of traffic management suggests that the main character of *A Father's Law*, the popular African American police captain, appears to be living the dream of integration come true. As Ruddy's thoughts are narrated early in the novel, "Yes, all in all, he—Rudolph Turner, captain of police, colored, Catholic—had made it" (15). As a model of black bourgeois success, Ruddy and his nuclear family represent the progression of the Chicago School of Sociology's race-relations cycle: racial "conflict" has given way to "assimilation" of the African American citizen into US democracy. Wright notes, "Ruddy loved being with the majority; he respected the wishes of the community" (26). Protagonists' names are often allegorically significant in Wright's fiction; "Bigger" registers that character's racialized anxieties about heteronormative black masculinity. That Ruddy's first name derives from a term that Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes was a term for light-skinned in official government documents hints at the complexion of his success ("Family Matters" 38). "Turner" further modifies "ruddy" to suggest that the police chief is a transitional figure in the history of race relations, a black man not marked indelibly as black. In *Native Son*, the race of the characters is conspicuously overdetermined—we know Bigger's race from his first appearance in the novel on page one and, moreover, black and white operate in a limited symbolic order throughout that text. In the seemingly post-racial context of *A Father's Law*, the race of the main characters is conspicuously understated—Ruddy is not identified as "coloured" until fifteen pages into the novel, at the beginning of the second chapter. His fantasy of traffic control, then, is also a liberal narrative of social and economic mobility, one that Ruddy is living out through the management of his own heteropatriarchal normativity. The former migrant become police officer has literally moved a long way from the prison of the Black Belt to settle in the suburbs.

According to Chicago School social science, the progression of the race-relations cycle towards integration intersected with the physical space of the city in distinct ways, as Burgess's concentric circles were intended to demonstrate. Ruddy's gainful employment is the primary indicator of this membership in a new black middle class, but to the policeman, his success is further evident spatially in the fact that he has been able to move his family to a predominantly white neighborhood of Chicago, into the "restricted residential district" of the outer circle of Burgess's zonal map of the city. Homeownership, both for Chicago School researchers and within the broader discourse of American citizenship, was a major index of middle-class identity. As St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton write in *Black Metropolis*, "To former sharecroppers and the descendants of chattel slaves, real estate is a potent symbol of stability and respectability" (663). As Ruddy's thoughts are narrated, "His neighbors were white; he did not have to fear hoodlums loitering about his premises" (15). Wright's word choice here reveals less than subtle racialization of urban space. "White" reads as middle-class, while "hoodlums" reads as lower class, African American, the pathological type of Bigger Thomases. Such neighborhood integration would have been a reality in the years after World War II, as African Americans began to move out of traditionally black areas of Chicago in larger numbers. While the imagined integration of *A Father's Law* is consistent with the relative peacefulness of these transitions during that time period—racial tensions were not at the same pitch as they had been before the Chicago Race Riot of 1919—Ruddy's unproblematic move into an all-white neighborhood is nonetheless exceptional. Such "invasions" were still highly tense.[61] Even after he is given the promotion, Ruddy still feels out of place in Brentwood: "Yes, Ruddy felt that he was on

[61] In his study of postwar housing integration in Chicago, Arnold R. Hirsch calls attention to what he calls the "'hidden' violence" of the period (xv).

alien ground; this was no Black Belt, Irish shantytown…this was *native-born* America, rich, proud, free. Could he ever understand these people?" (64, my emphasis). While his dream of traffic patrol represents his successful assimilation, it also expresses underlying anxieties about the black male occupation of (sub)urban space.

The Turners are pioneers of the urban racial frontier, leading the second generation progression out of the ghetto, a dynamic mapped by Burgess in his concentric circles model of the expanding city. Distinctly aware of the violent tensions surrounding shifts in housing demographics, Ruddy describes the careful steps he took in moving into his new home: "He had at once, as soon as he had purchased his property, joined the neighborhood protective association to the interests of all who owned property in the area, and he had been accepted with enthusiasm" (15). Following a "politics of respectability," the cop aligns himself with the protection of neighborhood property to counter popular white fears at the time that integration would decrease property values.[62] As Drake and Cayton write in the specific context of residential segregation in Chicago in the early twentieth century, "The native-born, middle-class, white population is the group that sets the standards by which various groups are designated as desirable or undesirable" (174). In fact, the main work of such property-owners' associations would have been to fight against neighborhood integration, as Drake and Cayton document.[63] Like the traffic patrolman, Ruddy controls the speed of his own social mobility to unsettle the geography of race as little as possible. He cannot be white, but he can

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[62] See Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search Of Billie Holiday* (2001). As she writes, "The politics of respectability seeks to reform the behavior of individuals, and as such takes the emphasis away from structural forms of oppression such as a racism, sexism and poverty" (72).

[63] As Drake and Cayton write of the interwar housing shortage in Chicago, "property owners' associations which had been originally organized for neighborhood improvement, now began to focus their attention upon keeping out Negroes" (178). Also see Drake and Cayton 182-190. For a particularly convincing case study of how such neighborhood associations operated, see Thomas Sugrue's chapter, "'Homeowners' Rights': White Resistance and the Rise of Antiliberalism," in *The Origins of Urban Crisis* 209-29.

approach homeownership with the proper bourgeois attitude and thus increase his "desirability" as a neighbor. Ruddy is later rewarded for his alignment with white property rights through his promotion to police chief of an all-white suburb. When the ward committeeman, "Scooty" Peterson, first tries to convince a young Ruddy to become a police officer, he focuses on the movement of bodies in urban space, telling him, "You direct traffic. You keep crowds from collecting. You protect property" (32). If he can do that, Scooty assures him, "you'll be a credit to your race." Ruddy's duties here can be broken down as serving to protect the racialized status quo; he is managing concerns about black social mobility, not only through neighborhood integration, but though political demonstration as well.

Ruddy's dream at the opening of *A Father's Law* evidences anxieties about traffic and mobility in urban space that were shared by early sociologists. Of course, migration to the city was what generated the problems and possibilities of the modern metropolis in the first place. But transportation within the city was central to Chicago School ideas about urban space as well. It was through basic transit systems of the city that individuals distanced themselves from primary groups and became integrated into larger society.[64] The flow of cars that Ruddy's traffic cop directs might be taking people to work in different neighborhoods, bringing them farther away from their homes and families, and into contact with the strangers of the city. In a broader sense, it was social mobility that Park, Burgess, and other early American sociologists attempted to theorize and to map. Burgess's "The Growth of the City" concludes with a section entitled "Mobility as the Pulse of the Community." For Burgess, it was part of the natural "expansion" of the city for neighborhoods to change character, and for individuals and families to move from

[64] See Park, *The City* 9. In Wright's autobiography, it is his first ride on a street car upon arrival in Chicago that signals for him the difference of the city (261-62).

place to place. The social process visualized in his concentric circles model was a progression towards assimilation. But the rate of this movement was critical. Too much "mobility" could have negative consequences for the health of the city. Excessive mobility, Burgess argues, leads to "vice" and was associated with the "zones of deterioration" (59). As an example of an unnatural rate of growth, Burgess offers "the great influx of southern Negroes into Northern cities since the war" (54). To visualize this "invasion," Burgess represents the Black Belt as exceeding the boundaries of the neat concentric circles on his map, extending from the "slums" to the "residential zone" (55). African American mobility was thus a specific problem for Burgess. While integration was inevitable in the modern city, the rate of this mobility had to be properly controlled; "deliberate speed" was necessary in making those transitions smooth (*Brown*).

Ruddy too is anxious about the pace of his own assimilation. After all, he was part of that wave of African American migrants to the urban North that so upset the metabolism of the city. Now he is at the forefront of the "flight" of the black bourgeoisie from the inner city as it "invades" the suburbs. When he is first called into the commissioner's office at the opening of *A Father's Law*, Ruddy worries that "racial trouble" could be to blame for the murder of the previous police chief, as he knows from personal experience that the Brentwood neighborhood is "an area in which a few wealthy Negroes had recently installed themselves" (29). In the same moment, he self-consciously reflects on his own repressed criminality, his own fantasies of invading the white city. The suggestion here is that Ruddy may be called upon to help manage this invasion as part of his work as a police officer, the assimilated black officer working to regulate just that type of movement. Ruddy is both personally—through his involvement with the local neighborhood association—and professionally—through the cop's duty of crowd control—complicit with systematic residential segregation in Chicago that in fact

limits progressive movement in the city. The police played a role in enforcing segregation, protecting white property rights, and reinforcing the reality and the image of black neighborhoods as vice districts. Ruddy conforms to the laws of sociology in *A Father's Law* in how he has lived out the assimilationist narrative of *Brown*, progressing through the stages of Park's race-relations cycle, and patiently traversing Burgess zones of the city. But Ruddy also represents sociological laws in the way that he, as a police officer, manages the various invasive movements of other outwardly-mobile bodies in modern urban space.

Sociological Management of Urban Space: From City Planning to Criminology

> The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies—this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city.
>
> - Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (198)

The opening dream sequence in *A Father's Law* emphasizes a broader sociological fantasy of social control in the African American police chief, a disciplinary "watchfulness" that extends from the "dark" recesses of his own psyche to all corners of the city. The traffic fantasy signals that part of Ruddy's success as a policeman and as a middle-class black man is achieved through an apparent self-mastery, but also a mastery of urban space like that assumed by early American urban sociologists at Chicago. Powerful social forces are identified and directed so as to manage their impact. Of course, this anxiety about managing the mobility, or traffic, of revolutionary and diseased bodies in urban space was at least as old as "Baron" Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovation

of the medieval city of Paris in the nineteenth century.[65] The process of modernization medicalized urban space, imagining the city, as Burgess later did, as a circulatory system. In his anatomo-political relationship to the metropolis, the dream figure of the traffic cop symbolically stands at the intersection of a variety of modern social scientific concerns about crowds in urban space.[66] He is the managerial fantasy of Michel Foucault's carceral city: a disciplined, disciplining body. In Ruddy's mind, the top-down conception of urban space is derived from reading a manual, which emphasizes this scientific approach to the problem of the modern metropolis. While we might not shelve the *Metropolitan Handbook for Traffic Policemen* alongside the textbooks of canonical sociology, the coincidence of sociological and criminological discourse in the plot of *A Father's Law* signals a specific historical intersection between canonical social science and early twentieth century US police reform. For Wright, though, these new disciplinary regimes also share a logic with the modern criminal mind of the serial killer.

Ruddy's by-the-book character might not fit the popular image of the anti-intellectual cop from the second half of the twentieth century, but the academic character of his dream of law enforcement is consistent with the reform of American police forces that began in the 1930s. As historian Samuel Walker recounts, a new era of professionalism in criminal justice was heralded in at the same time that University of Chicago sociologists were institutionalizing the study of crime and other urban problems, both influenced by progressive-era reform movements, both directly influencing each other's respective development, and both pointing toward the consensus opinion about

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[65] Wright's first apartment in Paris at 13 Rue Monsieur Le Prince was just blocks off the anchor avenue of Boulevard Saint Germain on Haussmann's revitalized Left Bank.

[66] In *Dreaming the Rational City* (1983), M. Christine Boyer makes such a Foucaultian argument, that the twofold goals of reformers and planners at the time were "how to discipline and regulate the urban masses in order to eradicate the dangers of social unrest, physical degeneration, and congested contagion, which all cities seemed to breed, and how to control and manage spatial growth of these gigantic places so that they would support industrial production and the development of a civilization of cities" 9.

the "modern authority" of social science in the *Brown v. Board* decision.[67] University of Chicago sociologists made significant contributions to the early twentieth century study of crime and to the study of juvenile delinquency in particular. Much of this work was done under none other than Ernest Burgess at the Institute for Juvenile Research (IJR). It was Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay, though, whose work at the IJR would produce the seminal text of Chicago School criminology, the 1931 *Social Factors in Juvenile Delinquency*. The Wickersham Commission—formally known as the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement—issued the first national study of the US criminal justice system in 1931, criticizing American police departments and calling for widespread change in the nation's justice system. An entire volume of the report was devoted to Shaw and McKay's research on juvenile delinquency; Shaw offered "particular gratitude" to Burgess in his "preface" and the volume made repeated use of his professor's zonal mapping of modern urban space (vii). The Wickersham Commission signaled that police investigation would now be authorized through a scientific model of expertise. J. Edgar Hoover's Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which opened in 1932, furthered the professionalization of criminal justice. The innovations in the forensics of police work are clearly evident in *A Father's Law* through Ruddy's scientific expertise and application of scientific police procedure.[68]

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[67] For Walker's work on professionalization generally, see *A Critical History of Police Reform*. He specifically cites Chicago School sociology as an influence on progressive era police reform in *Popular Justice: A History of American Criminal Justice* (1998) 123, 164.

[68] Gunnar Myrdal cited police reform through professionalization as key to the spread of the "American creed." At the conclusion of a chapter on "The Police and Other Public Contacts" in *An American Dilemma*, he attributed a new type of civil servant emerging out of New Deal social programs, writing, "educated and trained white men and women whose primary interest is not simply to keep them in their place, but to advise them and help them to a better life" 546. As David W. Southern notes, Myrdal's call for a more educated police force had a direct effect on law enforcement training. In 1947 University of Chicago sociologist Joseph Lohman drafted a guide for police officers that would serve as a model

Like Wright as author-sociologist, Ruddy as policeman-sociologist has risen above his roots to no longer be a slave of the environment, but to be in control of the routes of the modern city. For the majority of *Native Son*, Bigger is viewed as typologically determined by the surrounding urban environment. Ruddy, though, as a high-ranking police official, is a professional manager of the city. The top-down conception of urban space in his traffic fantasy establishes Ruddy Turner as a sociologist within Wright's novel: he exerts the same will over his environment as the social scientific or literary mapmaker. This application of the social scientific method is what distinguishes him from the criminal type; both personally and professionally, he has seemingly transcended place and its determining effects, moving from object to subject of the sociological gaze. As Wright continues the description of the dream patrolman: "The footwork had been perfect and that impersonal look on his face certainly inspired confidence" (1). The precision of the traffic cop's movements and his objective relation to his work indicate a scientific professionalism. The patrolman is also clearly a professional figure in Tolentino's sense, a model of the physical and cultural integration of the racialized minority within the landscape of the city. The extent to which ruddy is able to utilize the tools of the social sciences in his investigation further indicate his role as sociologist within the novel.

Ruddy's scientific professionalism is evidenced in *A Father's Law* through the way in which the police deploy a variety of social scientific forms of discipline in their investigations. In *Brown*, social-psychological research was at once forensic and legislative in its citation as "modern authority" in the matter of race relations. In the novel, the expert opinions of psychologists are repeatedly cited by the police officers, as

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nationally. See *Gunnar Myrdal and Black White Relations: The Use and Abuse of* An American Dilemma, *1944-1969* (1987) 110.

some kind of "emotional" disease appears a clear factor in the case of serial murder at the center of the plot of *A Father's Law*. The police chief makes use of the tools of sociology as well, analyzing maps, demographic data, and life histories. In his investigation, Ruddy collaborates with a sociology professor, Dr. Louis Redfield, who he first meets conducting his own private investigation of the killings and who has literally written the book on the white neighborhood of Brentwood Park where the murders take place. Redfield, described by Ruddy as an "amateur detective," assists in the police chief's investigation, further emphasizing the overlap between social scientific methodology and police procedure at the time and in Wright's novel (129). The fictional scholar is named after two prominent Chicago School professors, Louis Wirth and Robert Redfield.[69]

Throughout *A Father's Law*, Wright places a repeated emphasis on the science of detection: that is, the utilization of modern advancements in the techniques of police work. As with his dream of the traffic patrolman, a fantastic welding of body, machine, and cityscape, Ruddy links biological, sociological, and criminological discourses in his conversation with Redfield. His specific use of epidemiology as an analogy for police work anticipates Foucault's figuration of the "plague-stricken town" as the ideal of the "disciplinary power," as well as Park's imagining of "social contagion" as the germ of cultural pathology. Like Chicago School sociologists, then, the police investigator regresses to biological analogy in order to comprehend and apprehend criminality. Speaking generally about law enforcement, Ruddy tells professor Redfield:

> In general, people have very high-flown and romantic notions about criminal investigations. But that kind of stuff is for books, not life. Criminals and crimes run to types, like diseases. A competent officer can usually tell in ten minutes

[69] Incidentally, Robert Redfield was the first social scientist to testify in a US court of law *as* a social scientist. *Sweatt v. Painter* (1946), an important precursor to *Brown*, led to the admission of the first African American student at the University of Texas at Austin. See Clifford Wilcox, *Robert Redfield and the Development of American Anthropology* (2004) 85.

> what kind of crime and criminal he's dealing with…Maybe, like the measles, there may be complications in this or that crime; then we take that into consideration, and we make the necessary deductions or inductions. Now, our law-enforcement machinery and our criminal investigation network is geared to do just this. And it does it very efficiently. (180-81)

Opposing the romanticism of "books" with the realism of "life" as studied through biology, Ruddy figures police work as a scientific profession. The police detective is like the doctor who diagnoses diseases. While Ruddy specifically references the sociological method of typologization here, the underlying biological metaphor hardens the science of such investigation and further emphasizes the epidemiological nature of sociological type, the contagious nature of urban neighborhoods that infect their inhabitants.

In their interview, Ruddy asks Redfield to provide him with a "bird's-eye view of the town" of Brentwood for the purposes of his investigation (180).[70] The professor begins by unfolding a map, explaining that he does not think that the killer is from within the suburban community. Redfield's map is a version of de Certeau's "planned and readable city." Moreover, throughout the presentation on the history of Brentwood, Redfield uses Chicago School sociological arguments in his defense of this position, following Burgess's "The Growth of the City" quite closely. At first Redfield offers an apology: "I'm a scientist and try to be objective. If I say these crimes do not smack of Brentwood Park, it is because of the population structure and function here" (182). According to the sociologist, then, the Brentwood murders are committed by a foreigner to the neighborhood, as such deviance is not considered typical of the suburb. The "heart of Brentwood" is, for Redfield, the "big houses" of the "restrictive residential district," as Burgess termed the area (186). The neighborhood, though, is bordered by a "second generation" immigrant community; they are described by Redfield as "poor," but "law-

[70] My research has yet to confirm if Wright based Brentwood on an actual suburb outside the city. Evanston is similarly incorporated separate from Chicago and seems the most likely candidate. But Brentwood is south of the city, most likely so that it is adjacent to the largely black South Side.

abiding," "Not too much disorganization among 'em'" (187). At one point, almost paraphrasing Burgess's concerns about social mobility, the fictional sociologist relates how the "fashionable suburb" of Brentwood was invaded by "big apartment hotels" and that "Crowds are beginning to surge in from all over. That'll bring Brentwood Park's population to its peak" (184-6). While not yet integrated, Redfield adds how the neighborhood established restrictive covenants in the fear that "Jews, Negroes, and what they lumped together as 'undesirables'" would soon invade the community (185). Redfield's discussion of residential zoning and population demographics theorizes the crime spree in *A Father's Law* along the lines of canonical sociology as relating to the "surging crowds" of ethnic and racial "undesirables." Yet despite the clear overlap between these fictional, social scientific maps of the city and Burgess's concentric circle model, *A Father's Law* disrupts the coherency of these sociological models. The suburb, not the ghetto, is the origin of the sociopath in Wright final novel.

As *A Father's Law* progresses, the disciplinary authority of sociology embodied by Ruddy is undermined. The central irony of the novel is that the police chief, for all his dreams of perfectly-managed traffic and his professional management of volatile urban populations, fails to police the boundaries of his affluent Chicago suburb and his own middle-class family home. His own son, Tommy, the student of sociology, becomes the prime suspect in Ruddy's investigation.[71] In his final novel, then, Wright offers two seemingly opposite views of the figure of the social scientist. One is the sociologist as "police," a disciplinary figure in the Foucauldian carceral city; the other is the sociologist

[71] Given his name, Ruddy's character and his dream traffic patrolman are also a *post-civil rights* fantasy of a post-racial era. In *A Father's Law*, Wright remarkably anticipates the "liberal retreat" from race after the civil rights acts of the 1960s, legislation that was argued to end institutionalized responsibility for the problem of race. The continued struggles of African American were now blamed on individual pathology. It was time, so the argument went, for blacks to literally "get their own house in order" (Steinberg 25). Ruddy too imagines such self-regulation as critical to his successful assimilation. The irony, however, is that despite his "watchfulness," the criminal of *A Father's Law* is within his own house.

as criminal, the disorder that haunts the highly-ordered body. As the novel reaches its climax, Ruddy's reluctant abdication of the position of chief parallels the mounting evidence against Tommy in the Brentwood case. More than simply the failure of social scientific authority to apprehend the criminal, *A Father's Law* argues that the disciplinary logics of sociology are productive of modern criminality. As the police commissioner tells Ruddy when filling him in on the facts of the Brentwood case, "It was as though the murderer was watching us, following our line of reason" (58). As I will demonstrate below, this reciprocity between police and criminal is unique to the modern figure of the serial killer, unlike the structured binary of the sociologist and the juvenile delinquent.

For Susan Mizruchi, the utopian "white city" of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the architectural equivalent of the emergent social sciences' will to order urban space. The classically-designed buildings reflected the "managed pluralism" of the cultural exhibits that they contained, thoroughly cataloged by the modern social scientists ("Fiction" 189). As Mizruchi observes, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries nascent social scientific theories brought to an increasingly multicultural society a similar sense of social control. Ironically, at the time of this epic celebration of the powers of modern knowledge production, a serial killer, H.H. Holmes, was collecting corpses within the walls of his Exposition tourist hotel, a perversion of the architectural symbolism that Mizruchi observes in the White City itself. Despite the disciplinary mechanisms of modern social science and policing, mass murder went undetected in the city. What is more, such serial killing might be imagined not in opposition to the policing of sociology, but as a continuation of the very same logic. Holmes is central to literary critic Mark Seltzer's theorization of the serial killer in modern society. Seltzer writes of the nation's first serial killer, "What becomes perspicuous in this case are the mechanisms of reduplication that make one individual

indistinguishable from an indefinite number of others: the collapse of personality into…sheer typicality" (244). In short, the typological thinking of modern criminology and sociology gives rise to the typological overthinking of the modern serial killer. This subtle slippage from order to disorder provides the central tension of the mystery of *A Father's Law*.

Breaking the Father's Law: The Regression of the Race-Relations Cycle

> I came into the world imbued with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.
>
> - Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (109)

In an early scene from *A Father's Law*, Ruddy questions his son about his studies late one night while Tommy crams for a sociology exam. "It's all about this South Side of Chicago," the eager young social scientist explains. He continues: "It's really simple, almost obvious. People who have no family get lost and go bad. People who make money develop airs and manners of other people and become strangers to their own" (10-11). "No family" here translates through the politics of respectability to mean normative familial formation. Tommy outlines a basic formula in the canonical sociology of race, one that accounts for both pathological behavior and successful assimilation. He essentially summarizes the social scientific narrative of race relations that structured Robert Park and Ernest Burgess's *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* as well as the sociological plots of Wright's first and final novels. Moreover, within the broader context of twentieth century African American history, his focus on the family here anticipates the infamous Moynihan "report"—originally published as *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* (1965)—and its description of the black family as a "tangle of

pathologies" (30). (In fact, much of Moynihan's central thesis in *The Negro Family* was borrowed from the earlier research of E. Franklin Frazier in Chicago.[72]) The "problem" of the African American family can be rephrased using the narrative framework of *Native Son*: Bigger Thomas, born in the stereotypically problematic female-headed household, becomes a juvenile delinquent because of the absence of a properly authoritative father figure. Meanwhile, like good suburbanites, Tommy's parents lie awake worrying about their son's well-being, and Ruddy checks in on his late night studies. Tommy's good "manners" as a school boy cultivating bourgeois respectability contrasts Bigger's "badness." Though Tommy's description of the process of assimilation above is more ambivalent in its reference to the "strangeness" of middle-class black identity, at first the Turners seem to be living the civil rights dream of racial integration.

As I have suggested above, Ruddy's position as a municipal authority, authorized in part through social scientific theory and method, parallels the "modern authority" of social science in *Brown v. Board*. In this liberal narrative of race relations, Ruddy's son, representing the post-civil rights era generation more generally, completes the race-relations cycle initiated by his father. Tommy is the double embodiment of sociologically-determined racial equality: the cosmopolitan son of rural migrants and the professionalizing minority. Yet, the scientific jurisprudence of *Brown* ultimately echoes dissonantly in the murder mystery of Wright's final novel. In breaking the law as a killer, Tommy also breaks these social scientific laws of his father's generation; he deviates

[72] In their *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (1967), Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey write, "the basic paradigm of Negro life that Moynihan's report reflected had been laid down by the great Negro sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, over thirty years before" (7). In his recent *Freedom is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle Over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (2010), James T. Patterson claims that "No author in these or later years had a greated infuence on the study of black families—or on Moynihan—than E. Franklin Frazier (29). He also traces Frazier's influence on Gunanr Myrdal's research on the African American household. Anthony Platt has worked to disentanlge Frazier's long and illustrious career from the Moynihan legacy. See his "E Franklin Frazier and Daniel Patrick Moynihan: Setting the Record Straight."

from the progressive common sense of integration and the sociological theories about space and identity that underwrote the Supreme Court decision. In the critical cartography of *A Father's Law*, the major sites of assimilation, the school and the suburban home, zoned for organization and stability in Burgess's concentric circle map, are remapped as origin points for a new form of behavior. Further, the clear distinction between deviant and normative types is repeatedly blurred as Wright questions the problematic sociological conceptions that underwrite such reductions of personhood.

While it should be noted that the University of Chicago had admitted African American students well before *Brown* and the changes that followed that decision in higher education, Tommy's enrollment at an elite, mostly white, university highlights the Turner family's entry into middle-class American society. In his academic success, he is the generational inheritor of civil rights legislation. It was, as Max argues in *Native Son*, the very lack of such educational opportunities due to segregation that caused Bigger Thomas to kill. Tommy's pursuit of a professional degree distinguishes him from the typical pathological case studies of the canonical sociology of race. As the second generation offspring of a migrant from the rural South and a black sociologist of the Chicago School, Tommy appears at first to be the dream of the University's engagement with the community of that city—a model minority in training.[73] Tommy's position as student of sociology emphasizes this "assimilation" stage of the Chicago School race-relations cycle. Moreover, Tommy is raised in a privileged, mostly white, all but hermetically-sealed neighborhood, one of Burgess's "restricted residential districts," thus further emphasizing his successful assimilation. He is the embodiment of second generation immigrant success; as Julia Wright describes him in her "Introduction" to *A*

[73] For an excellent account of the history of the University of Chicago and its relations to the city community, particularly the South Side, see Robin Faith Bachlin, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890-1919* (2004).

Father's Law, Tommy is a "tennis-playing, articulate, analytic Bigger" (xii). Extending the logic of Max's sociological argument in Wright's first novel, that more stable environment should inoculate Tommy against the pathological behavior exhibited by the juvenile delinquent. Yet just as the urban environment warped the psyche of Bigger in *Native Son*, in *A Father's Law* Wright investigates the warping effect of the suburbs. It was the broken families of the inner-city African American communities that were largely the focus of sociological research and public policy throughout the twentieth century, and are the focus of Tommy's research as well, but in his final novel, Wright focuses on the pathologies of the black bourgeoisie household.

The pages in E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro in the United States* cited by the Supreme Court make a simple argument, one that could describe the ethos of the Turner family: "The Negro minority is striving for assimilation into American life" (681). As an early black sociologist and one of Park's students at the University of Chicago, Frazier may in fact be a model for Tommy Turner's student of sociology.[74] African American social scientists recognized the complexity of their position and that of the black bourgeoisie. Frazier explicitly acknowledges this complexity in his own contemporary studies of the "Negro" middle class. Frazier writes in his essay "The Negro Family in America" of the role of integration, assimilation, and the middle-class African American household:

> The emergence of a new middle class is evidence of the increasing integration of the Negro in American society. However, the increasing integration of the Negro has brought into relief problems of culture and personality. The new middle class is without roots because it is increasingly cutting itself loose from its roots in the segregated Negro community. Moreover, it still has no social roots in the white community since it has not become identified with the white middle class.

[74] That Frazier's wife, to whom he dedicated *The Negro Family in the United States*, was named Marie like Tommy's girlfriend further supports my claim that the black sociologist might be a model for his character in *A Father's Law*.

> Consequently, middle-class Negroes are experiencing considerable conflict and frustration, and this is being reflected in Negro families…Formerly, social and personal disorganization was confined almost exclusively to lower-class Negroes but *increasingly the problems resulting from disorganization are manifesting themselves among middle-class Negroes*. (*On Race Relations* 209, my emphasis)

Despite Frazier's citation in *Brown* in support of desegregation legislation, here it is the assimilated middle class that is pathologized as "disorganized" or somehow culturally dysfunctional.[75] This new form of disorganization is echoed in Tommy's statement about how the black bourgeoisie have "become strangers to their own." In *A Father's Law*, Tommy represents this emergent pathology originating from the alleged normalcy of professional sociological personhood. It is in part the "strangeness," or "rootlessness," to use Frazier's term, of this position—his disconnection from the "Negro" folk and incomplete connection to white middle-class identity—that destabilizes the young student of sociology.

Following black sociologists like Frazier who deformed the mastery of canonical sociology in their own way, Wright critiques the Chicago School in part by revising the meaning of the central concept of social disorganization, the very topic that Tommy studies at the University. As a sociology student at the University of Chicago, Tommy's initial fieldwork is in the Black Belt of the city; he studies "Class stratification, poverty, color consciousness, family disorganization" (10). Juvenile delinquency in *Native Son*, and in Chicago School research from Park and Burgess to Shaw and McKay, was environmentally determined and thus statistically localized to the inner city. In *A Father's Law*, though, the deviance of the serial killer is not traceable within the concentric circle schematic of metropolitan order; it thus exceeds typical pathology and

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[75] Frazier expanded on his research into the African American middle class in his shocking later work, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). Some indication of the controversial nature of that work can be gathered from the fact that it was first published in France as *Bourgeoisie Noire* 1955. It took two years for the text to be printed in the States and then received much criticism from both blacks and whites. See Frazier's preface to the English edition 1-8.

regional typology according to canonical sociology. As the idea of social disorganization exceeds its sociological and epistemological boundaries, the assimilated student of the social sciences realizes the sociopathic nature of his discipline. The Chicago School formula cannot fully account for his own sociopathy, because it is the source of that particular deviance. Bigger's pathology allegedly results from the disorganization of the black family and black neighborhoods, but Tommy's pathology is a form of organization, the anxious efforts of the expert social scientist to realize the city. The typological method of the serial killer thus imitates the processes of categorization institutionalized by canonical sociology.

Whereas Bigger cannot understand the social scientific terms that the Daltons use to discuss him when he first visits their home, Tommy is literally a master of the very sociological discourse he disrupts. His discovery of science, though, is far darker than Wright's own published revelations; for Tommy, the "figures" on the African American community that Wright studied in the Chicago School archives inspire his body count. If the policeman's sociological fantasy of bodily control represents a broader order in the city, then the serial killer's dispersal of bodies throughout urban space mimics the systemicity on that disciplinary regime while deforming it. Like Fanon, in his search for scientific meaning in the Enlightenment tradition, Tommy, via the emergent disciplines of the social sciences, discovers himself as "an object in the midst of other objects." This objectification leads not exactly to the post-colonial revolution that Fanon imagined but to politicized serial murder. It is the structure of sociological knowledge itself, its typological conception of personhood, its conception of the ghetto as diseased, that causes the young scholar to kill. Instead of, as in *Native Son*, the pathological black object rehearsing his pathology, it is the assimilated black subject who in *A Father's Law* deforms his own professionalism.

Sociologist as Serial Killer: The Typological Method and Body Count

> One of the consequences of migration is to create a situation in which the same individual…finds himself striving to live in two diverse cultural groups. The effect is to produce an unstable character—a personality type with characteristic forms of behavior.
>
> - Robert Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" (881)

Mark Seltzer's theorization of mass murder in his *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (1998) helps to elaborate the perverse and intimate relationship between the criminal and the sociologist in *A Father's Law*. Seltzer too notices an intersection between the methods of the modern criminal investigator and the social scientist. Wright's by-the-book, professional ideal of the policeman fits precisely with Seltzer's bookish image of the detective of machine culture in that Ruddy's police work is largely about knowledge production, as his deployment of sociological methods and theories evidences (Seltzer 40). For Seltzer, the investigator and the sociologist are both specifically twentieth-century phenomena directly linked to historical shifts in the production of information. Seltzer references the turn-of-the-century period of professionalization in his discussion of this new bureaucratic form of violence and implicitly alludes to the early history of the social sciences. His argument, though, is more explicitly focused on linking these modern knowledge-producing occupations with the intellectual patterns of the serial murder, an expert criminal in a sense. For Seltzer there is an "entanglement" between the "repetitive, compulsive, serial violence" of the serial killer and the "mass technologies of registration, identification, and duplication, copy-catting and simulation" that characterize the emergent information technologies of both professional sociology and criminology (3). In my reading of the sociopathic sociologist in *A Father's Law* through Seltzer's theories, I will more directly connect the

statistical methodologies of the serial killer and the modern social scientist. What links the sociologist and criminologist with the serial murderer is their shared way of thinking about individuality.

In *Serial Killers*, Seltzer notes an historic change in criminology beginning in the late nineteenth century from a focus on the "character of acts to the character and identity of the actor; the positing of the category of the dangerous individual" (4). This paradigm shift in professional criminology parallels a similar development within the related, nascent discipline of sociology: the emergence of the typological method and the ideology that was at its foundation. For example, the pathological type of the juvenile delinquent functioned to categorize individuals into broader classes of deviance. Seltzer writes, "The emergence of the kind of individual called the serial killer is bound up, it will be seen, with a basic shift in our understanding of the individuality of the individual. This new individualism is bound, in turn, to a general mutation in our understanding of both 'the criminal' and 'the sexual'" (2). I add to this list "the racial." Early American sociology was similarly concerned with the individuality of the individual, and particularly, as Suzan Mizruchi puts it, "the divide between social determination and individuality" ("Fiction" 191). As Park argued of juvenile delinquency, it was "not primarily a problem of the individual, but of the group" ("Community Organization" 111). Through the concept of environmental determinism, Chicago School theorists reconceived the notion of individuality, imagining the type as a species of individual-as-group. For Mizruchi, typology reordered a society that had become increasingly complex and diverse by tracing the ecological origins of modern characters; behavior then could be more easily predicted and thus managed. For Seltzer, this alleged order has a dark side that the serial killer represents and enacts.

Through his sociological studies in *A Father's Law*, Tommy is developing a "new idea about crime," an idea that very much resembles that of progressive-era police reform, founded as it was on contemporary developments in the social sciences (23). As Ruddy's intellectual colleague in the police department, Ed Siegel, summarizes Tommy's pathological theory of crime: criminals are "sick people. They have to be treated." Ed further explains that the sociologist of crime believes such law-breakers can be diagnosed using "questionnaires" that reveal certain "attitudes" in the test subjects (24). Tommy's social scientific investigation of crime is suggestive of modern methods of social science: the surveys used by Chicago School sociologists, for example, in their study of trends in urban poverty and crime. Like sociologists, Tommy is obsessed with categorizing people as types. Moreover, his focus on character as opposed to behavior parallels the shift that Seltzer and Mizruchi note in the turn-of-the-century history of criminology and sociology. Both operate with a typological imperative, an imperative that slips all to easily from descriptive to prescriptive. The very same typological imagination structures Tommy's secret career as a serial killer.[76]

In Seltzer's analysis, serial killing, or "murder by numbers," is a deadly deployment of the social scientific logic that views individuals as types. The serial killer begins in this experience of the self as a type of person:

> Murder by numbers is the work of the individual I describe as the statistical person: the serial killer, that is, is not merely one of an indeterminate number of others but an individual who, in the most radical form, experiences identity, his own and others, as a matter of numbers, kinds, types, and as a matter of simulation and likeness ('just like me'). (4)

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[76] Tommy also has new ideas about criminal punishment. As Ed summarizes, "the idea now is that criminal ought not to be punished…Putting people in jail is not a way of protecting society" (23-4). Tommy's focus on treatment here resembles progressive-era efforts at prison reform that aimed to build a more rehabilitative system. See David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and its Alternatives in Progressive America*.

Similarly, typology figures in the investigation in *A Father's Law* in terms of identifying both criminals and victims, further evidence of the "modern authority" of Ruddy's police force. In an extensive, speculative discussion with Ruddy, Ed detects a typological pattern in the Brentwood serial killer's murders. He offers that the preacher, the priest, and the detective's son who were killed "represented something to that killer." Ed continues, "those whom he kills have to be kind of transfigured in his mind" (137). At the same time, Ruddy and Ed deploy typological thinking in order to characterize and track the serial killer. "This transfiguration business" that Ed speaks of is the business of both the serial killer and the sociologist; both transform the individual into a species of mechanically-reproduced data, the types that can account for and categorize the increasingly multicultural demographics of the city (138). As a student of sociology, and as a middle-class African American college student, Tommy is of course well-versed in such typologies.

I redirect the series of questions that Seltzer asks of the serial killer to Tommy: "What would it look like to experience oneself, through and through, as a type of person? What would it feel like to experience this perpetual looping of information and desire, technology and intimacy, violence and pleasure as one's form of life?" (5). Let us assume that, unlike Bigger, but like Wright, Tommy had access as a student of sociology at Chicago, to the data collected by University professors and students on the South Side. Wright's final novel is an attempt to imagine how such a statistical conception of personhood affects a student implicitly implicated by such numbers. These questions are a version of the underlying racial subtext that the early American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois reads into his white colleagues' comments on race relations at the opening of *The Souls of Black* (1903): "how does it feel to be a problem?" Indeed, to experience oneself as a type is the essence of Du Boisian double consciousness, that "sense of always

looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (103). Tommy's double lives, as student of sociology and serial killer, and as son of the police chief and criminal under investigation, hint at his own experience of this twoness. It is a twoness, moreover, that perhaps underlies the position of the sociologist of color more broadly. Tommy himself acknowledges the "strangeness" of his own bourgeois professionalization in his late-night conversation with his father, a strangeness that Robert Park theorized in his figure of the "marginal man," one who "lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less a stranger" ("Human" 142).

For historian Henry Yu, this double-consciousness is precisely the contradictory crisis that the sociologist of color at the University of Chicago faced during the interwar period as both an objective social scientific expert and an informant based on his subjective experience as a minority. Yu describes this positionality more practically: "The role of the marginal man demanded that those people who had escaped their racial enclaves and left behind their cultural heritage return to the cultural no man's land they had just crossed" (123). Tommy revisits his own cultural past in his studies by returning to the Chicago Black Belt of his father's youth as a student of African American inner-city community. It is in this sense that he is both subject and object of scientific investigation just as he is at once detective and suspect in the criminal investigation of the Brentwood serial killer. As Yu reminds us, the "marginality" of the sociologist of color is a "spatial metaphor, denoting a location on the periphery or in the margins between two locals" (176). Tommy's marginality thus does not allow for the distinct and coherent map of urban space produced from the singular and total vantage point of the professional sociologist. Rather, his bourgeois disorganization, as Frazier might have called it, causes him to blur the lines of Chicago School cartography. In his sociopathy, Tommy adds

deeper meaning to Park's "unstable character" of the marginal man; for Wright, this instability extends to the position of the sociological subject more broadly.

Tommy's objectivity as a social scientist is contingent on categorizing and pathologizing an object from which he is not fully distinct, through his family history of migration but also through his romantic involvement with Marie, a young black woman who he meets in the Black Belt during the course of his fieldwork. Furthermore, the canonical sociology of the Chicago School and the sociological jurisprudence of *Brown* legislate an integration of this experience of double-consciousness. As Gwen Bergner has recently argued in the context of the Clark doll study, "Social psychology's demand that children demonstrate 'accurate' racial preference is symptomatic of the binary logic of racial formation in the United States, a permutation of the one-drop rule, whereby one's psychic identification must match one's assigned race as either black or white" (303). Tommy has been driven to kill by the newly legislated epistemologies of canonical sociology. As we investigate his case further, we will find that the clues point to a number of different ways that Wright's final novel disrupts the coherence of Chicago School theory. The sociological narratives of pathological and assimilated personhood, as well as neighborhood—the bad and the strange—underlie the tangled detective novel plot of *A Father's Law*.

Noir Detective and the Black Queer: The Tangled Normativity of the Father's Laws

> In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected, whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitude towards men and women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust.

- James Baldwin, "Preservation and Innocence"[77]

While a student at the University of Chicago conducting research on the city's South Side, Tommy meets and falls in love with a young black woman named Marie. Engaged to be married, the two lovers get blood tests that reveal Marie has congenital syphilis. Despite maintaining her sexual innocence—her illness is presumably the result of the sins of her father—and the possibility of treatment through modern medicine, this news causes Tommy not only to break off his engagement but to shift the subject of his research from the Black Belt to white Brentwood.[78] As Ruddy learns of this personal tragedy in his son's life, he begins to suspect that the "shock" of these events somehow caused Tommy to lose faith in "the law" (229). The serial killings in Brentwood start immediately after Tommy breaks up with Marie. For the police chief protagonist, Marie's sickness and Tommy's apparent revulsion to it become critical to comprehending the serial killings. In Ruddy's logic, the tragedy of Marie's situation causes a breakdown, at least in his son's mind, in the larger moral and legal structures of the city. For Tommy, I argue, the moral breakdown is more precisely within the structures of modern sociological knowledge production. Though not yet confessing to the Brentwood Park murders, Tommy describes leaving Marie as "like killing" her (175). Through Tommy's professional-training, canonical sociology has taught him to reimagine his fiancé as a source of pathology; distanced from Marie in the position of expert, he becomes, as he said earlier, a "stranger to his own." Tommy's "killing" or "typing" of Marie can thus be read as part of what Suzan Mizruchi has called the "sacrificial basis of social scientific

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[77] Quoted in Campbell, *Paris Interzone* 34.

[78] Wright similarly abandoned a woman that he intended to marry after discovering she had syphilis. Several biographers suggest that he was haunted by guilt from this experience when he began his final novel. See Fabre 196-7 and Rowley 148-9. This psychologizing of the author, however, may only further contribute to the social scientific misreadings of Wright. I chose instead to read Wright as analyst himself.

rationalism" (*The Science of Sacrifice* 6).[79] In linking Marie's syphilis with Tommy's serial killing, Wright unsettles canonical sociology's mapping of racial identity in urban space as well as popular social scientific research on the "tangled pathologies" of the African American family that are one of the disciplinary legacies of the Chicago School. Before the killing even starts, the heteronormative conceptions of sociological personhood have already killed off a number of queered and othered identities. Marie's disease does not ultimately cause Tommy to kill; it is the very conception of her as diseased, the moral framework of that sociological diagnosis, that motivates the murders.

Though Tommy has fallen in love with Marie, he knows, consciously or unconsciously, that the individuation of romance will be superseded by the statistical typologization of his social scientific profession.[80] Due to the specific racial subject matter of his research agenda and to his own deracialized bourgeois home, Tommy is no doubt anxious about the perceived deviance of black culture. He cannot help but view Marie's illness as another example of African American pathology, and thus he is forced to view his own lover as a psychologically damaged. As he tells his father about abandoning Marie, "I didn't decide. Something in me decided" (89). The sociological association of black women and illicit sexuality at this time was so prevalent that Marie's syphilis, linked as it was to sexual transmission and sexual transgression, makes her guilty by association of such sexual delinquency. At midcentury, sociologists were still, as Du Bois wrote in 1903, "gleefully count[ing] his bastards and prostitutes" as evidence

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[79] Mizruchi further articulates this concept of sacrifice in terms of residential segregation: "Sacrificial categories tended to oppose (as they had from their inception in ancient times) the interests of 'strangers'—immigrants and other sorts of transforming or transformative groups, understood as productive of social instability—to the welfare of 'neighbors'" (7).

[80] The Jewish-American author, Anzia Yezierska, who, like Wright, had an intimate relationship with early American social science, explores these issues in her own fiction. Lori Jirousek reads Yezierska's work as a revisionary ethnography that rejects scientific objectivity in favor of a more personal relationship to the object of study. See her "Ethnics and Ethnographers: Zora Neale Hurston and Anzia Yezierska."

of the dysfunction of the black family (9).[81] As Marie explains, even her own mother "is convinced that I caught it running around with boys…men…drinking" (117-8). Tommy knows the gender dynamics of sociological typing; as he tells his father when he describes his research, "It's the women in the setup who catch hell" (11). The fact that a doctor informs Tommy that the disease is congenital and curable only emphasizes the fantastic epistemological force of such social scientific discourse about black identity. The conflict here between hard and soft, natural and social, sciences is revealing of the limits of the biological analogies that underwrote canonical sociological thinking: medicine can cure Marie, yet the social stigma bears its own almost physical burden. Despite the evidence to the contrary, in *A Father's Law*, Marie stands for the alleged failures of black womanhood and the national problem that was the African American family.

If the failure of Marie and Tommy's relationship is linked to his serial killing, then the larger context of the alleged pathology of African American family may be a clue to his motivations. Despite the model of heterosexual normativity offered in his parents' relationship, by ending his engagement with his fiancé, Tommy fails to form the normal family expected in his middle-class household. The study of the abnormality of the African American household was central to the political history of US sociology from the Chicago School through the Moynihan "report" on the "Negro Family." As literary critic Roderick Ferguson has argued in relation to Robert Park and other Chicago School sociologists, "intimacy became the framework for understanding the changes in urban environments" (32). Ferguson traces this social scientific relationship between intimacy and the city back to W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant* in which

[81] Kevin J. Mumford writes in his *Interzones*: "The statistical, sociological, and reform discourses on prostitution combined to reconstruct the central stereotype of the prostitute, and of the fallen woman, as a young, 'female Negro sex deliquent'" (112).

the concepts of social organization and disorganization were largely framed through marriage and heterosexual reproduction. Well before the infamous Moynihan "report," E. Franklin Frazier's research on black families continued Thomas and Znaniecki's focus on the family within the context of the African American community. The "demoralization of Negro family life" was the topic of Frazier's dissertation thesis at the University of Chicago, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (*The Negro Family in the United States* 119). Following Chicago School theory, Frazier argues against the biological explanations of such dysfunction, contextualizing the alleged failures of the African American family within the context of black history from slavery through the Great Migration. One of the primary indices of black familial disorganization, mappable to a higher degree as one approached the city center of Burgess's model, was the female-headed household. What Frazier termed the "matriarchate," a result in part of loosening morals after urban migration, was the central problems in the modern African American community. Patriarchal authority, the father's law, then became the prerequisite for familial stability within the black household.[82]

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[82] The "father's law" in Wright's novel, though, is also one of the foundational concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis, primarily referring to the prohibition against the son sleeping with the mother, but more broadly to the legislative authority imposed by the paternal figure. As both "law" with an upper and a lower case "L," Ruddy is the embodiment of the Freudian superego. Fabre notes that Richard Wright was well-versed in Freudian theory. He references Freud repeatedly in his writings, including an epigraph and in-text reference to the psychoanalyst in the novel that preceded *A Father's Law*, *Savage Holiday*. Fabre, *Books & Writers* 57-58. But, as Hortense Spillers argues in her suggestive reading of the Moynihan "report," the canonical narratives of sociology and psychoanalysis are deeply entangled. In her seminal essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers observes that there is Freudian slippage in the patriarchal rhetoric of the canonical sociology of race. She reads the infamous Moynihan "report" through the lens of psychoanalysis: "According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's celebrated 'Report' of the late sixties, the 'Negro Family' has no Father to speak of—his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential line of the black community, the 'Report' maintains" (455). Within this broad social scientific context, then, the "father's law," his authoritative presence, concerns not only gender but racial formation as well, or better yet, the racial formation of black masculinity. Both are at stake in Wright final novel. In insisting on a sociological analysis, I also follow Gwen Berger's call in *Taboo Subjects*: *Race, Sex, and Psychoanalysis* (2005): "We must look beyond the Oedipal scenario, the family, and the period of infantile development to examine racialization and to move psychoanalytic inquiry into the sociopolitical sphere" xxviii.

Because Ruddy is such a strong presence in his son's life and because he is a municipal authority himself, it would appear that he provides the necessary familial environment for Tommy to develop normally. Moynihan cites Frazier on the authority of the father figure among the black bourgeoisie: "the middle-class Negro American family is, if anything, more patriarchal and protective of its children than the general run of such families" (29). But a closer look at the Turner household suggests that the "missing agencies" that allegedly result in Moynihan's "tangle of pathology" are perhaps all too present; Tommy is lost in a tangle of normativity. Like a stereotypical suburban parent, Ruddy is overly involved in his son's daily life, yet he seems to understand Tommy very little. What is in part so fascinating about the sociopathy of the serial killer in *A Father's Law* is that it reverses the emerging pathological conception of the black male in American sociological and political discourse. Whereas in Frazier's research and Moynihan's report, matriarchy causes the dysfunction of the black community, in *A Father's Law*, the authoritative presence of the father is equally productive of dysfunction or disorganization. As a family-friendly, more intellectual version of the hyper-macho noir detective of Baldwin's critique of the genre—Ruddy is almost too heteronormative. Wright reimagines the canonical sociological gaze as a hypermasculine one that disciplines the criminal queerness of modern urban types like the overly-sexual woman and the gay man. Despite his normative, nuclear upbringing of the Turner household, the son is nonetheless suspected of the very sexual deviance stereotypically associated with inner-city black culture.

Not only does Tommy fail to start a normal family after breaking off his engagement with Marie, but he is suspected by his father of being a homosexual. In *Native Son*, as the protagonist's name suggests, Bigger struggles with issues of castration and feminization that are allegedly typical of black male dysfunction in modernity. But

Tommy's failed marriage to Marie also leads to his being labeled sexually deviant. Ruddy links their breakup to Tommy's questionable sexuality: "Jesus, I must get that kid a gal, for I don't want 'im to develop any crazy complexes. Just because one gal is contaminated does not mean that they all are, he reasoned" (93-94). It is hinted that Tommy is possibly homosexual at various points throughout the novel, another way in which he breaks the canonical sociological father's law of heteronormativity. The father is suspicious of the son's sexuality from the first pages: his behavior "reminded Ruddy of some of the queer characters he had had to handle at the city jail…Why wasn't Tommy more straightforward?"—the terms "queer" and "straight" do not operate innocently here (6). Ruddy views his son's queerness as criminal. But, like Marie's syphilis, Tommy's homosexuality is not necessarily a reality, but a stereotypical imagining based on canonical sociological personhood; in this sense, Tommy himself is the second sacrificial offering in *A Father's Law*, a victim of his father's hypermasculine accounting for his family. These sacrificial acts of scientific rationality reproduce repeatedly like serial murder.

The larger context for the references to "queer" and "straight" in the novel is clear when Ruddy connects Tommy's homosexuality to his own middle-class success, "Everything else in his life is straight except that" (6). As Roderick Ferguson argues in his "queer of color" critique of Chicago School sociology, canonical sociological understandings of sexuality were entangled with their broader conception of assimilated US citizenship to the point that "African American culture indexes a social heterogeneity that oversteps the boundaries of gender propriety and sexual normativity" (*Aberrations in Black* 2).[83] His son's possible homosexuality threatens the cohesion of the respectable

[83] Ferguson further explores his idea of "sexuality" as a "technology of race" in his essay "Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity" 59.

middle-class lifestyle that the professional policeman has worked so hard to cultivate. For his own part, Ruddy proves his own "white" manhood to his fellow officers by telling gay-bashing jokes as they ride to headquarters in a squad car. The line that gets the biggest laugh is supposedly quoted from a criminal in a lineup: "But, Mister, I don't see my boyfriend but three times a week, and that don't make you no homo" (21). Tommy's alleged homosexuality continues a long association between black families and black neighborhoods more broadly labeled as deviant and diseased in the sociology of race, an association he himself reproduced as a student of sociology in the Black Belt. The failure of Tommy's research and engagement is staged on the South Side, the supposed "home" of black familial dysfunction like that evidenced in the openings scenes of Wright's *Native Son*. At first, the facts of the case hint at the physical association of identity or behavior and environment through which certain, largely ethnic and racial, neighborhoods could be viewed as "bad." In the end, though, the Burgessian logic analogous to the broader spatial logic of *Brown v. Board*—the damaging effect of segregated black space—is overturned.

Moral Regions in *A Father's Law*: The Sociological Jurisdiction of Vice in the City

> The vice district was the product of population movements, biased policing, failed reform, and sexually racist public policy. The slum was a representation, invented and popularized by social science, of the deteriorating neighborhoods, brothels, saloons.
>
> - Kevin Mumford, *Interzones* (141)

In *A Father's Law*, the pathological stigma of Marie's perceived sexual deviance, following Chicago School theory, extends beyond the African American household to possess a broader physicality within the space of the city. Not only is Marie considered forever tainted, but, for Tommy, so is the entire South Side of Chicago, in his words,

"contaminated…poisoned" (91). As Tommy describes it, "Each time I walked the streets, I trembled with each step. I felt the world would dissolve, melt, fade away before my eyes" (89). When Ruddy tries to isolate Tommy's trauma, he tells his son, "You're sick." But Tommy replies, "Only when I'm *there*, am I sick" (91, my emphasis). From this, the police chief concludes that the Black Belt is at the root of his son's problems: "The sense of uncleanliness he had felt had been extended to the entire area" (94). Thus, whatever dysfunction the syphilis represents is not merely individual or familial, but regional: it spreads to encompass the entirety of the South Side. Ruddy's geo-social analysis of his son's response to Marie's syphilis, that a sense of contamination pervaded "the entire area," specifically resonates with the Parkian concept of the "moral region." Moreover, Wright's association of space, culture, and disease, reconnects biology to race, not only in its mappability, that is its illusory physicality, but also in its outbreak as a type of "social contagion." While Marie's disease is not in fact contagious, there is nonetheless a racialized stigma of sexual deviance in its social conception, one that authorizes similar quarantines: the political and sociological construction of the vice district.

Roderick Ferguson relates an anecdote about a University of Chicago sociology student studying homosexuality in the city that makes a similar pathological link between typology and geography. The student, Conrad Bentzen, was conducting fieldwork exclusively on the South Side. Studying under Burgess, his project was an ethnography on the black and tan cabaret, the infamous inner-city site of racial and sexual intermixture. For Ferguson, this student's assumptions that the Black Belt was evidence of the "racialized nature of gender and sexual nonnormativity" are more broadly representative of Chicago School sociology's problematic conception of black culture, both black bodies and black spaces, as pathological (31). In the contexts of modern industrialization and urbanization, Ferguson writes, "black racial difference and black

neighborhoods became the signs of moral instability and alternative gender and sexual formations" (40). In Ruddy's sociological investigation, the South Side is the alleged origin of both Marie's and Tommy's sexual deviance; as in Burgess's concentric circles schematic, "moral instability" radiates outward from the inner city. Moreover, Ruddy's conclusions about the "regionality" of Marie's disease parallel his suspicions in the Brentwood case: the serial killings too are caused by contaminating forces originating outside the suburban neighborhood. Both Marie's disease and the outbreak of serial murder trigger the suburban police chief's anxieties about his own integration, particularly the physical and cultural distance between his migrant origins and his present middle-class success. The policeman is heavily invested in the sociological difference between the "restricted residential" and the vice district both personally and professionally. So Ruddy, model of the professionalized policeman, turns to canonical sociological theory to organize his investigation, converting his internal anxieties into outward suspicions, displacing the invader with the traffic patrolman.

Thus, a biased understanding of vice and deviance based on canonical sociological theories of racialized space underwrites Ruddy's investigation of the serial murders in Brentwood, theories that Wright reveals by the end of the detective novel to be misguided. He suspects that the white suburb is infected from without, and his first response, like the official in Foucault's "plague-stricken town," is to set up roadblocks in and out of the neighborhood. His suspicion is confirmed by the fictional sociologist Redfield's portrait of the Brentwood as a typical "restricted residential district" according to Burgess's zonal model. When he meets Redfield at a crime scene, the professor shows Ruddy a path that leads through a wooded park into the suburb. The "secret" path begins in "a slum area near the railroad tracks" (150). Ruddy orders another police officer, "We must map out this little-known path in these woods right away" (154). This apparent

break in the Brentwood case, eventually revealed to be a false one, follows the pathogenetic logic of Chicago School theories of criminal behavior: the deviance located in sociologically-designated "zone of deterioration" has somehow "invaded" the outer area of the city. Policing such borders to ensure that vice remained in African American neighborhoods, at once tolerated but segregated, was, in fact, common practice for law enforcement at this time. As historian Kevin Mumford reminds us, the formation the vice district was a social construct based in part on "biased policing" and "sexually racist public policy," and the image of the slum "popularized by social science" (141). While Chicago sociologists explicitly identified African American neighborhoods as vice districts, Chicago police corroborated this theory by working to restrict vice to the black areas of the city.

But Ruddy's stereotypical suspicions are challenged from the start when he learns of the native deviance of Brentwood itself. Ruddy is briefed by the police commissioner on the less-than-idyllic suburb: an unwritten record of deviance is outlined alongside the typical representation of Brentwood as moral high ground. "Brentwood is one of the nicer areas in America—spotless, clean, ranking high in all the vital statistics," Bill tells Ruddy. He continues, "But there is another and unwritten record about Brentwood," which includes, according to the police commissioner, lesbianism, pedophilia, and rape (42). Ruddy is surprised at first that such deviant behavior exists in the suburbs; "I thought that that took place mainly among poor folks, sleeping six in a room." His own thinking follows the Chicago School logic and that of Wright's earlier, amateur sociology in *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices*: it is the "unbearable closeness" of the Black Belt kitchenettes that cause Bigger Thomas's delinquency. Wright revises this environmentally-determined conception of deviance in *A Father's Law*, as the police commissioner confesses that crime "takes place in families where there are five people

sleeping in sixteen rooms too." The commissioner admits that the wealthy are protected by their "influence," thus acknowledging the department's complicity with the biased policing that contributes to the construction of the vice district (45).

It is the racialized and sexualized constructs of the vice district and the "restricted residential district," the "good" and the "bad" neighborhood, that the Brentwood serial killings evidence. Wright dramatizes this "constructedness" cleverly in the crucial break in the Brentwood case at the end of the novel. When the fragment of a gun used in one of the serial killings is discovered at a construction site in the Black Belt, Ruddy orders the building demolished and the concrete foundation brought to police headquarters to piece the evidence together. Meanwhile, he sends a sample of the concrete to the forensic lab for comparison with a substance he found earlier on Tommy's tennis shoes. In the final pages of Wright's extant text, Ruddy receives a call confirming that the cement samples are a match. So, the suburban serial killer attempts to hide evidence of his murders within a building of the inner city, the usual suspect. The police chief must then deconstruct, and in the process, destroy, the very structure of the ghetto in order to trace the criminal back to the suburbs. That the social scientific investigation of the serial killings itself becomes so destructive of the object of its study is part of the pedagogical lesson of Tommy's murders. Ultimately, the serial violence in Brentwood works not to reinscribe criminality within the borders of black inner-city neighborhoods, but to draw attention to the corruption of the white suburb itself.

At stake here is canonical urban sociology's claim that the development of the city landscape was a product of natural growth rather than purposeful design. Park imagined the moral regions formed "spontaneously," that "the population tends to segregate itself, not merely in accordance with its interests, but in accordance with its tastes or its temperaments" ("The City" 43). Of course, in this naturalized vision of the

city, there was no mention of the viciousness of the suburbs or of the racial segregation in the city that was not "spontaneous," but systematic. Tommy's killing spree reveals the artifice of this popular sociological conception of metropolitan urban space. In *A Father's Law*, Wright inverts Burgess's concentric circle diagram, as Ruddy discovers deviance in his own integrated, middle-class neighborhood. It is the deviance of Brentwood that is overlooked by the police because of the power of the suburb's residents. Tommy's serial murder uncovers this hypocrisy, as he kills typological symbols of authority from priests to police officer's sons. Like Claudia MacTeer in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) who disfigures the white dolls given to her at Christmas, Tommy murders his white suburban neighbors "to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (21). But it is not only the typicality or regionality of black deviance that causes Tommy to abandon Marie, but the biology of such racialized and sexualized transgression, the pathological way in which those differences are naturalized. The very term pathological so often used to describe the alleged behavioral abnormalities of the urban poor is epidemiological in origin. If, for the police chief, the central clue in the mystery of the Brentwood murders is Marie's syphilis, then the investigation is, following the logic of Park's analogy, at once epidemiological and sociological.

Social Contagion: Culture as Disease in *A Father's Law* and the Study of Crime

> Don't you understand, if Jes Grew becomes pandemic, it will mean the end of Civilization As We Know It?…This is a psychic epidemic, not a lesser germ like typhoid yellow fever or syphilis. We can handle those. This belongs under some ancient Demonic Theory of Disease.
>
> - Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (4-5)

After a description of a black cross-dresser in his ethnography of the South Side black and tan, Conrad Bentzen writes:

> Are such places as the one described a detriment to society? It is a question that requires careful analysis and consideration. It does provide an outlet for unstable people who are forced to repress their feelings in the normal group. But still we wonder if this process of conditioning and obvious approval doesn't encourage those on the borderline to slip into this role of uncertainty. (Qtd. in Ferguson, 31)

The student of sociology here displays an anxiety about the dangers of such sites of vice in terms of breeding deviance. Vice was a social force that he, as a white social expert, is perhaps above, but that others, "those on the borderline," might more easily be subject to. Could similar thoughts have passed through Tommy's mind upon his discovery of Marie's syphilis? As a "marginal man," a black sociologist and a second-generation migrant, he would be one of those "on the borderline." His irrational fears about his own infection follow from the perceived dangers of what Park called "social contagion," the epidemiological relationship between the neighborhoods of the city and their inhabitants. If the sexual transgressions of the drag queens in Bentzen's black and tan were potentially communicable, would not a case of syphilis be all the more, along with sexualized and racialized social stigma that accompanied it? Perhaps the young African American sociologist shifts the focus of his research from the black inner city to the white suburbs as a means of self-regulation, to police the privileged, but precarious "whiteness" of his own integrated position. That assimilationist narrative, though, is the "father's law"; it is the sacrificial hypocrisy of that allegedly post-racial lifestyle that Tommy's serial killer works to unveil.

In the early twentieth century, syphilis had long been associated with stereotypical African American hypersexuality.[84] The immorality of the illness, linked as it is with

[84] Loyd Thompson writes in his 1920 *Syphilis*: "The author is of the opinion that the greater prevalence of syphilis among negroes than among whites is not due to a greater susceptibility on the part of the negro, as has been contended, but (1) to the negro's almost absolute lack of morality and cleanliness, and (2), if we admit the theory that there must be a break in the continuity of the integument for the syphilitic organism to gain entrance to the body, it is possible that the negro's well-known sexual impetuosity may account for more abrasions of the sexual organs, and therefore more frequent infections than are found in the white

sexual transgression, follows the logic of the Chicago School's association of black neighborhoods as vice districts and with blackness more broadly as sexually deviant. As Marie laments, "I'm bad…Rotten…It's all written down in the medical reports" (117). Even after Tommy has taken hundreds of Wasserman tests to determine his own lack of infection, he still says, "It was moral. I felt unclean, contaminated, poisoned" (89). Ruddy describes syphilis as "the dreaded disease" and "morally loathsome" (93). He continues:

> A tainted stream of life had run close to his door and actually brushed itself against his own flesh and blood. A dreadfully damaged girl! A rotten girl—though rotten through no fault of her own—who would pass her rottenness on to others—and especially to her children! And to have children in whose blood seething spirochetes would be raging, and those poor doomed children would in turn, pass it on to others! And God help 'em if they were girls! (94-5)

The collapse of the biological into the architectural here—blood streams into doorways—expresses a regional, proprietary anxiety about the outbreak of this "moral" disease. Syphilis represents the potential undoing of all Ruddy's efforts at establishing middle-class respectability through canonical social scientific norms. Note that he is also particularly concerned about the potential generational effect of contagion. If the disease spreads to children, infecting generations to come, it will similarly undo the progressive movement of the cycles and zones of Chicago School sociology. Like the "Jes Grew" of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), a viral symptom of traditional African American musical forms, the syphilis of *A Father's Law* is also black culture imagined negatively as disease and as a threat to "civilization."

At the center of the mystery of *A Father's Law* is the metaphorical and metonymic relationships between disease and crime; crime is imagined by Ruddy to spread like a disease. Ruddy's earlier figuration of crime as a "disease" at once

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race" (1920) 52. Susan Sontag has more broadly noted the associations of syphilis with foreign-born, racialized threats. See *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* (2001) 59, 82, and 135.

anticipates the pathological rhetoric of "Culture of Poverty" arguments and echoes the language of "contagion" that permeates Chicago School conceptions of race and culture. Upon visiting Marie himself, Ruddy reflects that "Never in all his police work had he seen a criminal more abject that [sic] this girl" (117). In fact, though Ruddy is not the primary enforcer, Marie's disease is subject to disciplinary power. She mistakes Ruddy's visit for one of the routine checks made by the police to ensure that she is taking her medicine. Marie's surveillance here follows the ceaseless inspection of Foucault's outline of plague management (195). Though this is not the purpose of Ruddy's visit, part of his job description is such an anatomo-policing of the metabolism of the city, and the police chief focuses on the outbreak of infection in his investigation of the serial killer and his son's abnormal behavior. But contrary to Ruddy's internalization of Chicago School thinking about the epidemiology of deviance, Marie's physical disease does not cause Tommy's psychological illness; rather it is the slippage of that logic, from the biological to the cultural, the contradictions of that Chicago School's bacteriological imagining of social life, that generate his serial killings.

Wright's final novel might be read similarly to the outbreak narratives that literary scholar Priscilla Wald investigates in her recent *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), which I apply here to the intersecting geographical, micro-biological, and sociological narratives of *A Father's Law*. In her chapter, "Communicable Americanism: Social Contagion and Urban Spaces," Wald contextualizes the emergence of Chicago School sociology alongside the development of the discipline of bacteriology in the early twentieth century. She observes that early social scientists, specifically Robert Park, conceived of culture as contagious, or communicable, much like a disease. The consequences of this social scientific hypothesis, though, were ambivalent. The pathologies of the urban ghetto—delinquency, prostitution, homosexuality—were

dangerously contagious and had to be contained. But healthy American values were equally communicable and could be spread by the same kind of intimate intercultural contact that took place in cities. It became the sociologist's job, then, like that of the medical expert, and perhaps the police officer and realist novelist as well, to understand and thus potentially control social and moral diseases.[85]

While Wald discusses the management of what she refers to as "communicable Americanism," positive social contagion that leads to assimilation, within the context of the Jewish ghetto, the same issues of pathological contagion and infectious patriotism were no doubt at work in African American struggles for the rights of citizenship throughout the first half of the twentieth century, which of course culminated in the decision of *Brown*. In brief, the alleged ameliorative effect of desegregation followed an epidemiological argument: if the pathology of poverty could spread like a disease in the US ghettos, so too might the positive contagion of integration spread mainstream American culture. Certainly this spread of assimilation was what was hoped for by many desegregationists, and what Ruddy hopes for his son by moving him out of the inner city. But as much as Ruddy is proud to have middle-class white neighbors, he seems equally pleased to not have any "hoodlums" loitering on his block. The epidemiological argument of *Brown* too had an ironic consequence in the "white flight" that abandoned urban centers beginning in the 1960s, a movement the black middle class, and the Turner family themselves, soon followed. The outbreak of criminal contagion in *A Father's Law* registers this paradox, a refutation of the scientific and technocratic ideal of the sociological narrative of assimilation.

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[85] Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008) 114-156.

In his own sociological research, Tommy discovers the central irony in the progressive liberalism of the Chicago School: even as they argued that race was a social construct, sociologists only reified its otherness. If race was cultural rather than biological, then African Americans could be successfully assimilated into mainstream US society. But the concession in this seeming civil rights gain was that black culture, black bodies, and black spaces, were categorized as nonnormative, the opposite of modern citizenship. It is just this exchange that Tommy is forced to confront in Marie's syphilis and that Ruddy is forced to confront in his son's sociopathy. Marie's disease embodies a contradiction of canonical sociology: modern medicine can cure her disease, but she is still suffers from the cultural stigma. Nor is Tommy immune to pathological associations of black culture. Despite the efforts of his black bourgeois father to distance his family from their cultural roots on the South Side, Tommy still feels infected by the Black Belt. Through the mechanism of social contagion, the distance between inner and outer city collapses in the narrative of *A Father's Law*. As a reaction to this alleged contagion, Tommy's serial killing thus evidences the limitations in the epidemiological and epistemological logics of canonical sociology and integrationist legislation. His apparent normalcy—his suburban home, his father's presence, his elite schooling—are precarious privileges; as a young black man, he remains a "divergent type" in danger of pathological infection.

The Failure of the Panorama: Wright's Preservation of "Nervous Landscapes"

> We have grown used to *nervous landscapes*, chimney-broken horizons, and the sun dying between tenements; we have grown to love streets, the ways of streets; our bodies are hard like worn pavement.
>
> - Richard Wright, "We of the Streets" (3, my emphasis)

Both *Native Son* and *A Father's Law* conclude with descriptions of skyline views of the city. In both cases, though, the conception of the "planned, readable city" that de Certeau observes from atop the World Trade Center is somehow obscured. Yet the distance between these two scenes registers a shift in Wright's thinking about urban sociology and the sociology of race. For Bigger, at the end of Wright's first novel, the city remains invisible. For Ruddy, though he can see the buildings, they are falling down before his eyes, at least in his imagination. As literary critic Charles Scruggs writes in his *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (1993), the epistemological danger of the panoramic view of urban space is that "the sublime aesthetics of the skyline sublimates questions of practical power" (87). For Scruggs, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, like the urban sociology developed at the University of Chicago, worked to make visible the uneven powers that underlie the seemingly innocent grid of the city. Wright's bestseller opens in the Thomas kitchenette and by the novel's conclusion has made evident the economic link between Mr. Dalton's racist real estate policies and the urban decay of the South Side. As in *12 Million Black Voices*, the reader is exposed to "how the other half lives," and the progressive hope is that exposure will lead to reform of such practices. But while Ernest Burgess and others in the Chicago School no doubt visualized the inner city in maps and other such visual representations, how they made these places and those who inhabited them visible is not simply self-evident.

In the closing scene of Wright's bestseller, Max leads Bigger to the window of his jail cell and points out the buildings of the Loop in the distance. "Placing an arm about Bigger's shoulders," Max echoes Carl Sandburg's famous ode to Chicago as the "City of Big Shoulders," at once "wicked" and "brutal," yet also "alive and coarse and strong and cunning" (Sandburg 3). The lawyer attempts to console Bigger before his execution:

> You lived in one of them once, Bigger. They're made out of steel and stone. But the steel and stone don't hold 'em together. You know what holds those buildings up, Bigger? You know what keeps them in their place, keeps them from tumbling down?...It's the belief of men. If men stopped believing, stopped having faith, they'd come tumbling down. Those buildings sprang up out of the hearts of men, Bigger. Men like you. Men kept hungry, kept needing, and those buildings kept growing and unfolding. (426)

Max's panoramic vision out the prison window is in part a Marxist reading of urban space in which the "Bosses of the Buildings," like Mr. Dalton, own the city and exploit its less fortunate citizens. For Scruggs, *Native Son* is "a story of the failure of integration…a failure phrased in terms of city space, city maps, horizons and perspectives, and views from windows" (75). The distance, both cartographic and cultural, between the Dalton mansion and the Thomas kitchenette is the primary sign of this failed integration. Those two places represent two cities, as Wright suggested in his autobiography, one of "Horror" and one of "Glory." Meanwhile, the distance between the jail-like conditions of the Black Belt and Bigger's cell in the Cook County Courthouse is negligible. Yet the promise of integration, like the relentless verticality of the skyline itself, remains intact in Max's vision.

The "picture" that Max draws of a utopian urban ideal here at the end of *Native Son* also aligns with the Chicago School's conception of the city. In this final scene, Max attempts, like Burgess, to make sense of that heart of darkness at the city's center. Just as Burgess understood "expansion" as the primary mechanism of urban space, so too does Max see the city's "buildings…growing and unfolding." Like Max, the growth of the city in Burgess's concentric circle model unfolded toward a more organized, more just world. In a similarly progressive narrative, Chicago School research would inform public policy discourses about housing, crime, and other aspects of urban planning to produce a more

well-managed city, operating according to modern, scientific laws.[86] But the view from the prison window is still the view from the prison window, the same window through which State Attorney Buckley showed Bigger the lynch mob that clamored for his execution. It is a totalizing view, one that still fixes the inner city at a distance in its static gaze. Yet the center of this perspective will not hold and things fall apart.

For the young black man, such a conception of urban space is impossible. Wright tells us that "Bigger was gazing in the direction of the buildings; but he did not see them" (427). The city remains not only unreal to him, but unrealized. Bigger's reduction to pathological type, victim of the environment, may appear only further confirmed by his own inability to see even a partial glimpse of the city. Yet Bigger's inability to see Max's vision of the city precedes his rejection of Max's larger explanatory framework in the final pages of the novel; like Du Bois's double-consciousness, his vision is multiplied, but he nonetheless has a "second-sight." In this scene, Bigger moves from "trying to react to the picture Max was drawing, trying to compare that picture with what he had felt all his life" to feeling "he had to make Max understand how he saw things now" (427, 429). Bigger's renunciation of Max's panoramic view, then, might point toward another way of seeing and understanding the city, one not fully articulated in *Native Son* but explored in depth in *A Father's Law*: an embodied, affective apprehension of the unreal city of the rural migrant.

In an early poem originally published in *New Masses*, "We of the Streets," Wright exclaims in a Whitmanesque style of the collective of the black inner-city community: "We have grown used to nervous landscapes, chimney-broken horizons, and the sun

[86] Chicago School theory would continue to influence public policy in critical ways. As historian Davarian Baldwin notes, "By 1940, the work of Park and his students became the expert knowledge that helped put Chicago at the cutting edge of state sponsored [sic] slum clearance, urban renewal and development. The boundaries of White anger and benign neglect, that had always surrounded the Black Belt, became the city's infamous public housing constructed out of brick and steel" (333).

dying between tenements; we have grown to love streets, the ways of streets; our bodies are worn like pavement." Wright's first-person plural here, as Jeff Allred has argued in relation to the similar collective narration of *12 Million Black Voices*, "deforms" the singular, transcendent perspective of social scientific expertise.[87] Moreover, the "nervous landscapes" of the poem likewise resist objective, cartographic representation: no clear skyline can be grasped, only "chimney-broken horizons." While Burgess's map attempts to diagnose such areas of anxiety, and medicalize urban space more widely, the preservation of these "nervous landscapes," in Wright's poetry and fiction, works against the social scientific realization of the city institutionalized in Chicago School of Sociology. The streets, as Wright explains in his poem, are nonetheless a home, part of the lived, material existence of impoverished African Americans as well as other members of the working class. Such "nervous landscapes" exist within and in tension with the mappable city.

If, at the end of *Native Son*, Max finally expresses a hope in the ultimate democracy of urban space, this optimism is absent in the falling towers at the conclusion of *A Father's Law*. The final chapter of the extant text of the novel begins with Ruddy speeding along Lakeshore Drive after he learns that his son has been apprehended by the police. Despite his own urban idealism in the opening traffic cop dream, in Ruddy's rearview the buildings of the city finally do seem to be "tumbling down":

> To his left whitecaps leaped as bright and sharp as his panicked thoughts. To his right, turning and fading behind him, were the tall skyscrapers of Chicago. Well, something was happening that he never thought would happen: *the world of law was meeting and melting into the world of nonlaw*." (230, my emphasis)

Ruddy's theories of urban space, theories he has used to organize himself professionally and personally, have been shattered at this point in *A Father's Law*. In their wake, the

[87] See Allred, "From Eye to We," especially 566-70.

city's buildings themselves tremble. As the police chief sits in his office, the forensic evidence piles up against Tommy and, finally, on the last page, the father reads his son's confession to the Brentwood murders in an extra edition of a daily newspaper. While the scientific narrative of the police investigation evidentially concludes that Tommy is guilty, it is Ruddy who we see punished, as he loses his objectivity in the case, his authority with his subordinate officers, and, most likely, his job. Though he has followed *The Metropolitan Handbook for Traffic Patrolman*, the expert policeman has lost control of the violent movements of the city.

As Ruddy drives Lakeshore Drive, I imagine him traversing the various geographic zones schematized by Burgess in his famous model of urban demographics. But as Ruddy speeds through what should be neatly demarcated "commuters," "residential," "workingman's home," and "factory" zones, with the Loop at the center, zones that he and his family have navigated in their progress through the race-relations cycle, the lines on the map begin to blur. Indeed, overlaid on top of the narrative derived from Chicago School data, Wright's final novel is incongruous. Like *Native Son*, *A Father's Law* is a story of the failure of integration phrased in terms of city space, but in revised terms: the deviant white suburb and the innocent inner-city. The sociological and municipal districting of vice in the city is revealed to be as much fiction as science in the apparent psycho-social crumbling of the urban landscape.

To return to Cayton's sociological observation of *Native Son* that for "every move that Bigger took we have a map," at the inconclusive ending of *A Father's Law*, African American identity and experience are not as easily mappable. The failure of cartographic realism throughout the novel and this final fantasy of urban apocalypse link to other epistemological failures in the narrative, other ways of knowing the city and race that are similarly deconstructed. The sociological laws that allegedly govern the black individual,

the family, and the black community, social scientific principles that had underwritten actual legislation in *Brown*, are broken down. The falling towers in Ruddy's final vision of Chicago are thus materially representative of the failure of the social sciences more broadly, a failure that is figured in the sociopathy of the student of sociology, the police chief's son. In my next chapter, I turn to the case of another fictional policeman's son, Gunnar Kaufman in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. That novel furthers Wright's critique of canonical sociology by satirizing the social scientific construction of late-twentieth century inner-city blackness.

RECONSTRUCTING THE POSTINDUSTRIAL CITY IN PAUL BEATTY'S *THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE*

Introduction

> HUEY: Riley, we're not in Chicago anymore…These people are well-off…comfortable. These are not the hard streets of the South Side. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?
>
> RILEY: I think so. I'm the hardest, baddest thing for miles, and I can run amok here without fear.
>
> - Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks* (7)[88]

In the middle of his first creative writing workshop at Boston University, Gunnar Kaufman, the poet-gangster protagonist of Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), walks out in protest. It is the one and only class he attends while at college. Gunnar's reputation as a "street poet" precedes him, and his professor and classmates alike begin quoting his verse back to him upon learning of his identity on the first day. Though he has published in a variety of literary journals and, through graffiti, on walls throughout his West Los Angeles neighborhood, the release of a coffee-table book of photographs based on his writing, *Ghettotopia: An Anthropological Rendering of the Ghetto through the Street Poems of an Unknown Poet Named Gunnar Kaufman*, is a surprise to the young writer. Understandably upset by this unauthorized publication, as well as the unsolicited praise of his classmates, Gunnar walks out of the classroom and across campus, slowly undressing, as his professor and fellow students follow. Back at his apartment, stripped naked, he attempts to seek refuge in his girlfriend's lap. His classmates take notes. The professor offers to secure a publishing deal for the poet. With this scene, and throughout his own absurdly autobiographical novel, Beatty critiques the ethnographic expectations of the publishing industry—both political and aesthetic—that demand black authors produce racial knowledge for the reading public, literarily baring

[88] Both Howard Rambsy and Mark Anthony Neal have compared Aaron McGruder and Paul Beatty's cultural work in the context of post-civil rights black aesthetics.

themselves as Gunnar does literally here.[89] Like Thelonius Ellison's satirical mock life history, *My Pafology*, in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, Gunnar's poetry is misread as social scientific evidence and analyzed within a limited sociological framework for black identity. Gunnar himself is a Tommy Turner misread as a Bigger Thomas—though, as Everett might argue, even Bigger Thomas himself is misread as Bigger Thomas. Like Everett, Beatty is hyperaware of the intersection between African American literary history and the sociological study of the black community, and the way that ethnographic analyses of black culture have been extended to social scientific readings of African American writing.

Within the context of the late twentieth century discourse of urban crisis, the specific type of racial knowledge expected from Gunnar's poetry collection, described as "an anthropological rendering of the ghetto," is an ethnography of so-called "street" culture.[90] The keyword "street" operates here simultaneously as a market-driven and politically-correct referent to inner-city African American culture, and a vague geographic allusion standing in for racial identity, urban becoming synonymous with black.[91] In a post-racial era, it is not only impolite to reference skin color directly, but also anachronistic, and perhaps, from a strictly colorblind perspective, even racist.[92] Through civil rights legislation, the structural barriers to equal opportunity have been broken down, and African Americans, according to canonical sociology, are now free to

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[89] As his essay "What Set You From, Fool?" indicates, Beatty's biography parallels that of his protagonist to a degree. But *The White Boy Shuffle* is clearly fiction and, as I will discuss below, further moves beyond realism in its generic style.

[90] For an overview of postindustrial urban crisis with specific attention to the case study of Detroit, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996) 3-14.

[91] My reading of street here comes out of discussion with Brian Bremen on the use of the word "urban" in similar contexts.

[92] As Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield argue in "White Philosophy," contemporary "liberal racial thinking seeks to go 'beyond race' and does not support racialized perspectives on racism on the grounds that they are a kind of reverse racism": 737-8.

assimilate into mainstream US society, to move from the "streets" of the inner city outward to the suburbs. While the use of the term "street" acknowledges this historical shift in race relations by not naming race directly, it nonetheless functions as a racial code word working against this chronology, evoking the ghetto "underclass" popularly imagined as black.[93] This function of the term "street" as a racialized code word exemplifies a broader post-civil rights era trend in which the racialized ideology of canonical social science continued to operate in discussions of seemingly race-neutral social issues, particularly in debates surrounding urban poverty, but also in critical commentary on African American literature.[94] As an African American poet, Gunnar is necessarily "street" and his poetry is expected to realistically portray urban black experience, to reveal the inner life of the inner city. But in fact, Gunnar's categorization as authentically "street" does not fully account for the complexity of his background, a middle-class upbringing that traverses both suburban and urban spaces. As Wright begins to do in *A Father's Law*, Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* unmaps the racialized geographies of the post-civil rights era.

It is true that the coded racial signifier "street" is grounded in the popularly understood demographic shifts of the 1970s and '80s that shaped the American landscape

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[93] Michael B. Katz marks Ken Auletta's *The Underclass* (1982) as the moment when the idea achieved dominance in public discourse. For a more detailed account of the history of the concept, see Katz, "'Underclass' as Metaphor" 4.

[94] While welfare reform and urban renewal are perhaps not explicitly racial issues—indeed, this was the claim of colorblind neoconservatives who argued against such policies—Jill Quadagno has convincingly argued otherwise. As she writes in her *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (1994), "Although welfare reform is the policy issue that most readily translates into a racial code, other social programs—urban renewal, job training, school choice—elicit similar connotations. Politicians say that they are talking about social programs, but people understand that they're really talking about race. There is a good reason for American to understand coded messages about social policy as substitutes for discussions of race, for real linkages are more complex than messages delineated in recent political campaigns" (v). See also Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Anti-Poverty Policy* (1999).

into what funkologist George Clinton calls, "the chocolate city and its vanilla suburbs."[95] But it is also true that middle-class African Americans, like middle-class white Americans, fled urban centers in record numbers in the second half of the twentieth century.[96] Works of late twentieth century, post-civil rights African American literature set in the suburbs, like Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* and Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks*, explore how these recently enfranchised blacks located themselves within such conflicting racial geographies. In McGruder's comic strip, the character of Riley Freeman, a young African American boy whose family has moved from the South Side of Chicago—that origin point of black pathology in canonical sociology—to the suburbs, continues to model his life after the "gangsta" lifestyle portrayed by the rap superstars that he idolizes. Though African Americans were now at the assimilation stage in the Chicago School race-relations cycle, the demand for the racialized, urban cultural production of the "street" was as high as ever in that post-racial moment; the urban styles of hip hop were the primary mode of production and distribution of black culture in the late twentieth century.[97] Moreover, in both praise and criticism of rap music, commentators often frame rap as a form of urban realism or sociological evidence, authentically representative, for better or worse, of inner-city experience. But the

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[95] Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have used significant statistical analysis to substantiate Clinton's claims about the increasingly segregation of black populations in inner cities in their groundbreaking *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1993).

[96] Based on census data, Andrew Weise writes in his *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* that "Between 1960 and 2000, the number of African Americans living in the suburbs grew by approximately 9 million, representing a migration as large as African Americans from the rural South in the middle of the twentieth century. By 2000, more than one-third of African Americans—almost 12 million people—lived in the suburbs" 1.

[97] Ironically, Clinton's "vanilla suburbs" were listening to Parliament Funkadelic, just as they would later help popularize other musical genres of the "chocolate city," like the G-Funk brand of gangster rap produced by Dr. Dre. As William Upski Wimsatt writes in his Du Boisian collection of essays, *Bomb the Suburbs* (1994), "Like it or not, whites seem to be buying hip hop in increasing numbers. Nameless Noodlebrains of the Industry estimate that when a rap record goes gold, whites constitute at least half of the sales" 23. Using market surveys, Tricia Rose confirms the fact that middle-class white teenager consumers are a statisticaly signicant audience for rap music. See *Black Noise* 7 and 187 n. 6.

suburban Riley exemplifies the ways in which so-called "street" culture exceeds the boundaries of the ghetto, satirically problematizing the legacy of race-relations cycle with its underlying assumptions about the geography of black pathology and assimilation. As the conversation between the Freeman brothers in the above epigraph evidences, pathological conceptions of black masculinity linger even within sociological narratives of assimilation. McGruder uses Riley to explore the complex influences of popular culture on everyday African American experience and in particular how popular ethnographic conceptions of black masculinity shape the racial formation of a young black boy growing up in the suburbs. As a suburban African American child, Gunnar too feels the pressure of sociologically-inflected mass media images of blackness. As a young black poet, his writing is expected to evoke the "streets" of the inner-city.

It is no mistake that Gunnar's classmates' comments in this scene sound a lot like book blurbs. As the Third-World-want-to-be white girl, Peyote Chandler, tells him: "Gunnar, the urban piquancy of your work is so resonant, so resplendent, so resounding…you make the destitution of your environs leap off the page" (179). The would-be-critic describes Gunnar's poetry as "urban" and representative of a popular image of the late-twentieth-century inner city as "destitute," the sociologically-constructed "Other America" of the ghetto in the nation's War on Poverty.[98] Chandler and Gunnar's other liberal classmates, though, do not recognize the burden of their own terms of praise; while they are no doubt celebratory, they are also troubling, imagining the inner-city as a thoroughly pathological, and singularly black, space. Gunnar's *Ghettotopia* is expected to contribute to an allegedly naturalistic archive of immiseration on urban African American community that dates back at least to contemporary readings

[98] Michael Harrington's book, *The Other America* (1962), though not focused solely on urban poverty, initiated what became a publishing boom of ethnographic studies of inner city during Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty."

of Wright's best-selling *Native Son* as social scientific evidence of juvenile delinquency and extends to contemporary readings of the gritty realism of hip hop music. The street poet's audience reads his verse as an invitation into the black home for observation of the most intimate relations of the "Negro family," an invasion of privacy literalized in *The White Boy Shuffle* when Gunnar's creative writing classmates enters uninvited into his apartment. That Chandler redundantly repeats synonyms for "resonant" in her review of Gunnar's selected poems, referring to the evocation of his "environs," emphasizes the echo chamber, or feedback loop, between canonical sociology and African American culture in which both black identity and black imagination are environmentally determined as always already "street," and devoid of social or political agency. Gunnar's poetry is essentially read as a material artifact of the racially-coded "culture of poverty" that sociologists argued plagued inner-cities in the 180s and '90s.[99]

As literary scholar Madhu Dubey writes of postmodern black writers in the context of the racially-coded underclass debates, "given the severe pressure such discourses exert on black culture, it is scarcely surprising that claims to represent racial community have become highly fraught in postmodern African American fiction" (5).[100] Gunnar is clearly responding to these pressures in walking out of his creative writing classroom. Explaining why he runs away from such praise, Gunnar writes, "I felt like I had been outed and exposed by my worst enemies, white kids who were embarrassingly like myself, but with whom somehow I had nothing in common" (179). Though he is similar to his classmates in Boston University's Creative Writing 104 in his bourgeois

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[99] Anthropologist Oscar Lewis coined the phrase in his ethnography *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959). The concept was popularized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "report," *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965).

[100] Here and throughout, my focus on the intersecting contemporary discourses about the culture of poverty and African American literature follows what Dubey calls the "nexus of texts and cities" in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2003) 2.

background, Gunnar is nonetheless singled out and identified as a spokesperson for the "street." Like Tommy Turner, Gunnar's integration, his suburban upbringing and successful enrollment at an elite university, is unraveled by his imagined entanglement with the pathologies of inner-city black identity and space. Despite his assimilation, he cannot transcend the place of his blackness within the American racial landscape. At the same time, though, Gunnar cannot represent the "street" in his poetry as his white classmates expect him to. *The White Boy Shuffle* problematizes that very notion of authenticity. As out of place as he feels in the ivory tower, Gunnar also struggled to make friends with the neighborhood children when his family moved to the inner-city. As both like and unlike his white classmates at BU, Gunnar is an archetypal Parkian marginal man, one who "lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less a stranger" ("Human Migration" 354). Much of the humor in Beatty's novel plays on this "strangeness" as Gunnar shuffles back and forth between the inner city and the suburbs, estranged from both communities. Shelving Gunnar's poetry as "street" structures his professionalization as an aspiring African American author. Though his life history conforms to the canonical sociological narrative of assimilation, his story is nonetheless reduced to one of typical pathologization. Moreover, this story is a mere reflection of his experience, echoing his "environs" as Chandler praises, the author losing his professional and imaginative agency through his social scientific reproduction.

The poetry workshop scene in *The White Boy Shuffle* thus replays the classic sociological dynamic between scientific subject and object of study: the helpless victims, mere expressions of their environment, are "rendered" visible, observable, and intelligible by the expert, who is able to rise above all such determining forces. The urban poor are often described in sociological accounts as similarly lacking agency in their own lives, their existence determined by forces larger than themselves. Through the

unauthorized publication of his work, Gunnar is in fact completely denied authorship; he is an "unknown street poet." His graffiti must be "rendered" by a social scientific professional who displaces the poet himself as authority in order to make the poet's life legible to a wider (read: whiter) audience. The white BU professor plays Chicago School sociologist Robert Park's role as academic celebrant of "negro" folk culture, praised for its "spontaneity" rather than its artistry (*Race and Culture* 285). In figuring black culture as spontaneous, Park imagined African Americans as irrational and anti-modern. Their spontaneity, though, could be "rendered" rational through the technocratic expertise of the professional sociologist, figured as the pinnacle of Enlightenment rationalism. In walking out of the creative writing classroom, Gunnar paradoxically preserves some of this spontaneity as a protest against his own quantifiability, or rationalization, and the broader social scientific forces that would render inner-city African American community knowable and thus policeable. In this way, Beatty's critique of the multicultural publishing industry extends from the cataloging of black texts to the categorizing of black individuals in the post-civil rights era. *The White Boy Shuffle* is a deconstruction of these overlapping social scientific and literary discourses in the late twentieth century.

Though labeled an "unknown," Gunnar is nonetheless a figure of some renown as his classmates' starry-eyed praises emphasize. That is to say, he is infinitely knowable before he is actually known. In Gunnar's anonymous celebrity, Beatty reveals a central irony in the social scientific celebration of African American literature that follows the sociological critique of the culture of poverty: the critical acclaim that the generic category "street" generates is rendered through a typicality that denies any specific understanding. As Gunnar asks of the network of inner-city knowledge producers in a poem entitled "Your Problem Is":

how can…
…the political scientist, social scientist
the mad scientist, the editorial page,
the 11 o'clock news, the talk radio host
the urban planner, the school superintendent,
the special assistant to the president…

claim to know my problem
when they don't even know my name (172-173)

The gangster-poet here responds to the unasked question of W.E.B. Du Bois's interlocutor in the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. In extending and updating Du Bois's critique of sociology, Beatty's Gunnar highlights the ways in which experts attempt to make inner-city blackness visible within a variety of intersecting disciplinary entities from the academy to the news desk to city hall at the height of US urban crisis in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the BU scene, this social scientific knowledge production is extended to the multicultural publishing industry; Gunnar's writing celebrated as an evidentiary achievement. Moreover, his poetry satisfies a scopophillic desire for African American culture to turn the inside out, to render the black imagination mimetic of black experience. In *Ghettotopia*, this scopophilia is fulfilled through the publication of Gunnar's poems as photographs. Clearly, though, Beatty, like Gunnar, is uncomfortable with this social scientific gaze and exactly how it makes African American experience visible. In the introduction to the thirteenth anniversary of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison makes a similar observation about the ironic visibility of black culture through sociological lenses: "despite the bland assertions of sociologists, 'high visibility' actually rendered one un-visible" (xv). Ellison's famous novel challenged the social scientific reading of black writing through what Stephen Schryer describes as its "antinaturalist aesthetic" and Beatty's absurdist satire in *The White Boy Shuffle* similarly eludes the social scientific objectification of the "street" (56).

Beatty's anxieties about this representational crisis, and about the African American author's relationship to the literary establishment in the post-civil rights era, parallel his protagonist's feelings of overexposure in the Creative Writing 104 scene. The very misreadings critiqued in *The White Boy Shuffle* are built into the same publishing industry that released the novel in print. Beatty himself has lived the irony of Thelonius Ellison's satirical *My Pafology* being read as autobiography and struggled against such social scientific interpretations of his work. As the author remarks in June 2009 conversation with the *Independent-London* about his first novel:

> This is what annoys me when people tell me that my work is "street-smart"…Of course I do research and scribble down observations, but just because I'm a black writer writing about black characters doesn't mean that I'm producing autobiography. "Street-smart" is one of those back-handed compliments, because it also implies a lack of imagination. (Caveney)

Beatty takes issue with critics describing his fiction as "street" because such praise denies the author's creativity, replacing it with sociological typicality. His writing is in a sense understood to be environmentally-determined. Robert Park praised early twentieth-century black writing with similar aesthetic ambivalence in his "Negro Race Consciousness as Reflected in Race Literature": "Negro poetry is a transcript of Negro life…It has not always been good poetry, but it has always been a faithful reflection of his inner life" (285). As an object of popular sociological interest, the black author thus expends no imaginative labor in her own cultural production; fiction is reduced to a "transcript" materially documenting racialized interiority. Aside from denying his substantial literary talent, though, the "street-smart" praise of Beatty's novel, a legacy of the historical intersection between canonical sociology and black writing, also imagines his fiction as necessarily socially realistic despite the clear postmodern aesthetics of *The White Boy Shuffle*.

Even with Beatty's resistance to the term in interviews and his mockery of it within his novel, the first paperback edition of *The White Boy Shuffle* highlights the *Los Angeles Times*'s praise that the novel is "streetwise" on the cover. Another review from inside pages of that publication, excerpted from *The Denver Post*, directly compares the author's fiction to the cultural work of sociology, claiming the novel "Captures the problems and challenges of young blacks with a precision that ought to put most sociologists to shame." Beatty's novel here is imagined as a corrective to the tradition of ghetto ethnography through which social scientists in the Great Society shaped popular, negative conceptions of inner-city blackness in the US.[101] Though this review properly positions *The White Boy Shuffle* in critical tension with contemporary sociology, the critic still views the novel as employing the same social scientific techniques. The difference is a matter of "precision." The reception of *The White Boy Shuffle* exemplifies how the ethnographic framework for black culture has developed into a generic paradigm for seeing, understanding, and talking about the seeming transparency of inner-city black experience in the late twentieth century more broadly, a paradigm followed not only by academics, but by journalists, urban planners, and rap video directors as well. Beatty's novel works against this sociological conception of the African American community. I argue that *The White Boy Shuffle* does not attempt to account for urban African American everyday life in an empirical sense, as a "transcript," but satirically traffics in the opacities of such racialized knowledge production.

[101] Of course, there were significant exceptions to the ethnographic rule, perhaps most significantly in John Langston Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (1975), which collects first-hand accounts of inner city African American experience. The polyvocal ethnography was a clear critique of social scientific approaches to urban black experience in its decentering of the anthropologist's authority and its challenge to notions of racial authenticity; as one contributor remarks, "I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger" (ix).

In this two-chapter section, I read *The White Boy Shuffle* against the continued misconceptions of the racialized "underclass" in late twentieth-century popular sociology and culture, the post-civil rights era social-scientific construction of inner-city identity that historian Robin D.G. Kelley has called "looking for the 'real' nigga." The Creative Writing 104 scene in *The White Boy Shuffle* exemplifies how this sociological paradigm extends to the culture industry in the demand for African American literature to produce objective racial knowledge about the "street." In his Introduction to *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (1997), Kelley explains the title of his book as the imagined reaction of typical sociological objects to mainstream social scientific pathologizations of ghetto culture: "Charles Murray…even William Julius Wilson would find themselves in a position to have to defend their own mamas and their own behavior, not to mention their research" (3). Citing the Chicago School as a starting point Kelley traces a brief history of the cultural work of the "new ethnographic army" that mobilized in the decades after the decision in *Brown* to study the everyday lives of inner-city blacks (20).[102] Kelley's project, though, is not only a historical one, as he traces the genealogy of ghetto ethnography up to the then present day in order to make an argument about the "culture wars" of the 1990s, aiming to right the cultural turn in studies of and policies toward the urban poor. As I will elaborate below, the legacy of Chicago School sociology continues to haunt this late twentieth century moment in racial

[102] Davarian Baldwin also locates the roots of contemporary sociological discourse about the underclass and the culture of poverty within the canonical writings of early twentieth century University of Chicago sociologists: "The residual traces of 'The Chicago School' in its many permutations are resilient and not fading anytime soon. Books like *The Bell Curve* (1995) and *End of Racism* (1995) have resurrected Park's double inheritance of racial biology and culture. William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) focuses on family deterioration as the central problem of the Black underclass. It is clear that a wide chasm exists between the intellectual and political agendas of, for example, *The End of Racism* and the *Truly Disadvantaged* [sic]. They do however, find common ground in their attention to Black behavior as a clear indicator of a dysfunctional or pathological cultural system that led to both the social and economic marginalization of Black communities" (432).

formation, specifically through Gunnar Myrdal's monumental study of African American communities in his *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). Within this broader history of canonical social science, I view *The White Boy Shuffle* as similarly playing the dozens with urban sociologists of race, unveiling the complex politics and aesthetics at work in the alleged "culture of poverty."

In Chapter 3, "'Looking for the 'Real' Nigga' in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*," I discuss the politics of post-civil rights era black identity from the inner city outward. As the title of the novel suggests, our black protagonist partially identifies as a "white boy." *The White Boy Shuffle* is about the complexity of African American identity phrased largely in terms of the failures of sociological conceptions of US citizenship and black personhood. Gunnar Kaufman's "white" black boy specifically complicates the framework of black pathology and white assimilation outlined by Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*. The story opens in the suburbs and evidences the tensions that underlie the Kaufman family's integration despite the universal teleology of the Chicago School race-relations cycle. Even in the assimilative space of the suburbs, the type of "'real' nigga" troubles Gunnar's early racial formation as a model minority. Gunnar is growing up in the 1980s and '90s, when images of black deviance derived from the Chicago School rogues' gallery, most famously in Ronald Reagan's fictional characterization of the Cadillac-driving "welfare queen" of the South Side, underwrote both conservative and liberal calls to dismantle or reform welfare.[103] In their bourgeois privilege, the Kaufmans' rehearse the racially-coded constitution of "deserving" sociological personhood that eventually led to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (1996), passed the same year the novel was published.

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[103] For more on the role of gender in welfare reform, see Sharon Hayes, *Flat Broke With Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (2003).

From the 'burbs, the narrative shuffles further against the grain of the sociological mapping of race in the US, reversing the integrationist out-migration of the African American middle class when the Kaufmans move "back" to the 'hood. Though his mother relocates her children to the inner city so that they will have a more "authentic" black experience, Gunnar cannot locate the "real" niggas of ghetto ethnography in his impoverished neighborhood. Instead, he finds his new friends exceed the sociological types of urban minority youth. Beatty's inner-city cast of characters are "fantastic": the basketball player who never misses a shot; the gang-leader with the angelic voice.[104] While the author does suggest that there is indeed something that might be called African American identity, that blackness is far more complicated than conventional social scientific tools can measure and sociological types of African American personhood do not fully account for the diversity of black experience.[105] In the terms of the rhetoric of

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[104] Beatty problematizes the realism of inner-city identity and location through a stylized narrative technique that I will call, following Richard Iton, the "black fantastic." For Iton, the post-civil rights era demonstrates the limits of legal discourse and conventional political action in the African American struggle for equality. In his *In Search of the Black Fantastic* (2008), Iton uses the category of the "fantastic" to describe the activism of black popular culture in this context. As he writes: The inclination in formal politics toward the quantifiable and the bordered, the structured, ordered, policeable, and disciplined is in fundamental tension with popular culture's willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening, to sustain often slippery frameworks of intention that act subliminally, if not explicitly, on distinct and overlapping cognitive registers, and to acknowledge meaning in those spaces where speechlessness is the common currency (11). The post-civil rights "formal politics" that Iton describes here, with its dependence on the "quantifiable" and the "policeable," aligns with the managerial and statistical preoccupations of canonical sociology at this time. In his critique of social scientific construction of the ghetto, Beatty engages with this idea of the black fantastic, not only politically but aesthetically. A fantasy of inner-city blackness displaces the sociologically-constructed realism of ghetto ethnography.

[105] Though he clearly rejects racial authenticity as mass produced by ghetto ethnography, Beatty's satirical portrayal of the inner-city black community is nonetheless "sincere." In his genre-bending ethnography, *Real Blackness: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (2005), John L. Jackson Jr. suggests the use of the notion of *sincerity* as a way of avoiding the problematic category of *authenticity* in discussions of race relations. While doing away with the over-determined, overly-scripted concept of African American identity that authenticity entails, sincerity offers a way to perceive identity as less objective, if no less real. As Jackson writes, "With sincerity as a model…one recognizes that people are not simply racial objects (to be verified from without) but racial subjects with an interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear" (18).

urban crisis, *The White Boy Shuffle* rejects limited cultural explanations for inner-city poverty.

In Chapter 4, "'Keeping it (Sur)real' in *The White Boy Shuffle*," I move from an analysis of the complexities of black personhood to a related discussion of the racialized politics of space and place in the novel, focusing on the inner-city African American neighborhood in an effort to show how Beatty draws attention to the structural formation of the postindustrial city, that is, the ways in which failing social systems contributed to the impoverishment of black urban communities. The chapter argues that the novel's hip hop aesthetics work against the sociological rationalizing of black bodies and black spaces in contemporary debates about the underclass to locate a third space. I begin by looking at how the Kaufmans' move from Santa Monica to West Los Angeles uncovers a history of the postindustrial city that was partially buried by their own suburbanization, a history of social and economic divestment that, for Beatty, is the proper explanatory framework for the urban crisis of the late twentieth century. The infrastructure of Gunnar's new inner-city neighborhood becomes a key symbol of the postmodern metropolis, representing the legacy of this erasure in the palimpsest created of LA and other urban centers by midcentury modernist urban planning projects. The wall that surrounds Gunnar's fictional neighborhood of Hillside is a literalization of the carceral effects of urban highway development and the structural equivalent in the built environment of the law and order public policy directed at America's inner cities. The discourse of urban renewal that underwrote these projects was directly influenced by the canonical sociology and its now hegemonic theories about race and the space of the city. Gunnar Myrdal's monumental study in *An American Dilemma*, for example, provided a rational framework for so-called slum removal. But, like Gunnar's graffiti, vividly inscribed on the columns of the raised highway that has buried his new inner-city

neighborhood, the novel rewrites the master planning narrative of "urban decay," excavating the structural history of the postindustrial city through an aesthetic production outside the lines of the culture of poverty. While *The White Boy Shuffle* does offer an alternative history of Los Angeles in the aftermath of the 1992 riots, Beatty does not engage the intersecting discourses of sociology and public policy on the level of rational debate. *The White Boy Shuffle* rewrites sociological narratives about inner-city black neighborhoods because the aesthetics of the novel are far more fantastic than realistic, though the fantasy of the novel is nonetheless grounded in socio-economic realities.

Chapter 4 returns to the problem of the ethnographic expectations of African American literature introduced above and, specifically, the question of genre in Beatty's fiction. As an alternative to "street," I read *The White Boy Shuffle* as a hip hop novel, a generic label not yet fully explored by literary critics.[106] Granted, the term "hip hop" can generally function as a hollow signifier for "black" much like the empty "street." Moreover, hip hop culture is often misinterpreted ethnographically both by conservatives who argue that "explicit" rap lyrics are evidence of the culture of poverty and liberals who defend rap's realistic representation of the structural formation of the underclass. However, reading *The White Boy Shuffle* as a hip hop novel with a full understanding of both the sonic and social potentialities of the musical genre complicates exactly what is meant in sociological discourse by "the real."[107] Before they are "rendered

[106] Such a reading acknowledges the diverse cultural practices of hip hop in all its attendant forms—disc jockeying, rapping, graffiti art, and breakdancing—and investigates how these various techniques take literary form. As Josh Kun asks in "Two Turntables and a Social Movement: Writing Hip-Hop at Century's End," "What makes a novel hip hop? Does a hip hop novel have to try to replicate the aesthetic practices of hip hop culture—the flow of an MC, the beats of a DJ, the jagged curves of a graffiti artist, the attitude of a b-boy?" (590). I argue that *The White Boy Shuffle* engages the various arts of hip hop culture both on the level of content and form.

[107] In this endeavor, I am attempting to partially answer a difficult question asked by Madhu Dubey, "how exactly do we keep alive a notion of the real without resorting to metaphysics or mysticism?" 11. Put another way, how can African American postmodern fiction be both African American and postmodern? Hip hop, I will argue, helps to locate this new terrain.

anthropologically," Gunnar's poems are first "published" as graffiti, a hip hop literature written on the inner-city landscape. His aerosol art speaks not of the "destitution of his environs" but rather the determination to change both the discourse and the lived experience of urban decay. As a graffiti artist, he is an agent of social transformation rather than a victim of social forces. His poetry critiques impoverished popular discourse about the culture of poverty in the urban poor, revealing the complex aesthetics and politics of "street" culture. But he also reorients the debate about the problem of the inner city by literally focusing on the social structures of the post-industrial city. Hip hop music is a metropoetics grounded in the ruined infrastructures of the postmodern city. Like hip hop, which emerged from yet transformed the postindustrial urban space of the South Bronx, *The White Boy Shuffle* remixes inner-city LA in the early nineties, reimagining popular sociological images of the underclass.[108] *The White Boy Shuffle* does not produce racial knowledge for its readers as its cover jacket claims, but instead interrupts the rationalist discourse of ethnography with what Tricia Rose calls, in the context of her landmark analysis of hip hop culture, "black noise."[109] Just as rap music's noise scratches over the traditional conventions of music literacy, the novel challenges the authority of technocratic expertise on the inner city through its hip hop literary style. This technocratic expertise had emerged in the civil rights era through the "modern authority" of the social sciences, and most significantly Myrdal's notion of the "American creed," on the issue of race relations.

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[108] Rose locates the origins of rap culture within the late twentieth-century history of the American city. As she writes, "Its earliest practitioners came of age at the tail end of the Great Society, in the twilight of America's short-lived federal commitment to black civil rights and during the predawn of the Reagan-Bush era. In hip hop, these abandoned parts, people, and social institutions were welded and then spliced together, not only as resources of survival but as sources of pleasure" (*Black Noise* 22).

[109] In its anti-naturalist aesthetic, Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* continues a short tradition of surreal hip hop novels that begins with Ricardo Cortez Cruz's *Straight Outta Compton* (1992).

Chapter 3

"Looking for the 'Real' Nigga" in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*

Gunnar Myrdal and the Deadly Ritual of Sociological Personhood

> I find it distressing, there's never no in-between
> We either niggas or kings, we either bitches or queens
> The deadly ritual seems immersed in the perverse
> Full of short attention spans, short tempers, and short skirts
> Long barrel automatics released in short bursts
> The length of black life is treated with short worth.
>
> - Mos Def, "Thieves in the Night"[110]

That Paul Beatty—who received an MA in psychology from BU—is aware of this historical relationship between sociological knowledge production and African American experience is evident in repeated satirical jabs at the social sciences throughout his novel *The White Boy Shuffle*. These jabs are aimed not only at contemporary social scientists like William Julius Wilson and Charles Murray, but at the longue durée in the sociological study of the black community. Beatty's intimacy and discomfort with the historical intersection between canonical US social science and the African American imagination is most notable, as Mark Anthony Neal first suggested, in the author's naming of his main character after the famous Swedish economist, Gunnar Myrdal.[111] *An American Dilemma* remains the most influential work in the sociology of race in the twentieth century. Along with other social scientific studies, Myrdal's study was cited by Chief Justice Earl Warren in *Brown v. Board* as a "modern authority" in race relations. Thus Myrdal's research underwrote the integrationist narrative of the civil rights movement. *An American Dilemma* represented the ascension of the Chicago School race-relations cycle, with its emphasis on the progressive stages of pathology and assimilation,

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[110] Black Star's "Thieves in the Night," off their *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*, revises themes and passages from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* with in the context of the post-industrial city.

[111] For Neal, the protagonist of *The White Boy Shuffle* and the novelist himself are "ghetto-fab ethnographer(s)" (134). "Ghetto-fab," Neal explains, describes "the way some black urban poor, particularly black youth, have elevated elements of their existence to a ghetto stylishness, contradicting claims that these are emblematic of the debilitating nature of their lives."

to consensus opinion and, moreover, national public policy.[112] The "modern authority" of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* would set the terms for discussion of race relations for nearly half a century after its publication. Ironically, though, while Myrdal's arguments were employed to advocate for the expansive initiatives of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s, they were also deployed by neoconservatives who fought to retract the very same Great Society programs in the decades that followed. The model of racial formation canonized in *An American Dilemma* is important to review here as it provides critical background for my reading of Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. In particular, Myrdal's study was pivotal in a cultural turn in urban sociology and the sociology of race that would become popular in discourse about the problems of the inner city.

As its citation in *Brown* evidences, *An American Dilemma* was centrally concerned with education as a solution to the race problem. Myrdal celebrated what he referred to as the "growing intellectualization" of the nation at the time of the publication of his monumental study in 1944 (1030). The text of the study itself was a monument to academic knowledge production, totaling over 1300 pages. While education was critical for resolving contradictions between the practice of racism and the ideals of American freedom and equality in Myrdal's overall argument, it was also essential in the gradual integration of African Americans into mainstream US society.[113] At the heart of *An American Dilemma* is a pedagogical optimism in the possible education and Americanization of otherwise "culturally backward" blacks. The underlying premise of

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[112] See Omi and Winant 16-7 and Lee Baker 179-80 and 275n36, for more in depth resources on the relation between Chicago School sociology and Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*.

[113] The cultural education aspect of Myrdal's text has recently become fruitful for analysis of African American literature. Ferguson compares Myrdal's program with James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* 82-109. Tolentino devotes an entire chapter to Myrdal in her *America's Experts* in order to link US domestic and colonial imperial discourse about minority professionalization 31-48. Douglas contextualizes Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* using *An American Dilemma*, 114-8. Finally, Stephen Schryer has recently revisited Myrdal and Ellison's idea about professionalization in his *New Class Fantasies: Ideologies of Professionalization in Post-World War II American Fiction* (2011) 55-81.

the cultural education thesis was the cultural otherness of blackness. In a discussion of the "'Peculiarities' of Negro Culture and Personality," Myrdal writes, "As more Negroes become educated…it may be expected that they will lose their distinctive cultural traits and take over the dominant American patterns" (966).[114] As a black "white boy," a college student, and an aspiring writer, Gunnar might at first appear to fulfill Myrdal's progressive hope for cultural education of model minorities.[115] As I discussed above, however, the scene in Creative Writing 104 problematizes this canonical sociological narrative, evidencing the limits of such professionalization for African Americans. Gunnar's simultaneous valuation as a literary cause célèbre and devaluation as a sociological type parallels the contradictory experience of black scholars working under Myrdal in his research for *An American Dilemma*. Ironically, while Myrdal promoted black professionalism as a solution to the race problem, and was dependent on the contributions of African American sociologists and other professionals in his research, he nonetheless pathologized black culture.[116]

In the penultimate chapter of his monumental study, Myrdal asserts: "This can be said positively: we assume that it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans" (929). The corollary to this integrationist logic was the

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[114] Tolentino analyzes Myrdal's chapter on "The Negro School" as evidence of his concern with "cultural education." See Tolentino 42-6 and Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* 879-907.

[115] For Stephen Schryer, Myrdal was exemplary of the emergence of a "new class fantasy" that "abandoned technocratic pretensions toward social reform in favor of a different, more humanistic model of cultural education oriented toward the middle class" (*Fantasies of a New Class* 6).

[116] In her "Americanization as Black Professionalization" chapter of *America's Experts*, Tolentino argues that Myrdal's complete devaluation of black knowledge production was hypocritical given his advocacy of professionalization as a means to Americanization for racialized minorities. In Gunnar's marginal movement between pathological object and rational subject, the novel thus adumbrates Tolentino's critique of the discourse of professionalization in *An American Dilemma*: "the contradictory way that Myrdal assigns African American knowledge production a secondary status while he also figures the professionalization of black subjects as a critical factor in domestic racial reform and U.S. international ascendancy" (31).

assumption that "Negro culture" was "a distorted development, or pathological condition, of general American culture" (928). While environmentally determined, black urban culture was nonetheless pathological and the opposite extreme of the "larger American culture." For Myrdal, African Americans could assimilate into US society, but black culture was unassimilable. In constructing a choice between black pathology and the privileges of whiteness, as Matthew Frye Jacobson writes in his Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (1999), *An American Dilemma* solidified the binary system of racial identification in the US: "All others outside this black-and-white model…effectively disappeared from public discussion of race, power, and public policy" (265). In the words of the rapper Mos Def, "We either niggas or kings, we either bitches or queens." But, as the title of Beatty's novel suggests with its mocking reference to discourses of racial authenticity and essentialism—a soulless suburban black boy awkwardly dancing like a white kid—*The White Boy Shuffle* explores the limits of such binary racialized thinking about black personhood, what Mos Def refers to as the "in-between." The novel interrogates assimilated African American identity while also further investigating the supposed "distortions" of inner-city black culture. Beatty challenges Myrdal's insistence on the absolute desirability of black incorporation into what the Swedish economist referred to as the "American Creed" (xxii). In the end, the poet-gangster eventually rejects the cultural education route to assimilation as a kind of, in Mos Def words, "deadly ritual" of erasure; at the conclusion of the novel, he leaves BU to return to his adopted West Los Angeles to start a grassroots arts movement, moving from the ivory tower to the black ghetto.

The White Boy Shuffle and the Increasing Significance of Race

A moderate is a cat that will hang you from a low tree.

- Dick Gregory[117]

Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* is important background for *The White Boy Shuffle*, but it is the late twentieth century intellectual legacy of the 1944 study, and of the canonical sociology of race, that provide a more immediate context for the events of the novel. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, in their classic text, *Racial Formation in the United States* (1994), Michael Omi and Howard Winant link contemporary racial politics to a history of US racial formation that begins with the Chicago School ethnicity paradigm. With its incorporation in *An American Dilemma*, the race-relations cycle became progressive liberal common sense through the decision in *Brown*, a process anticipated and problematized in Wright's final novel written just years after the landmark case. In the post-civil rights era, this dominant model of racial formation entered its third phase according to Omi and Winant, "a post-1965 phase, in which the paradigm has taken on the defense of conservative (or 'neoconservative') egalitarianism against what is perceived as the radical assault of 'group rights'" (*Racial Formation* 14). In its assimilationist teleology, the logical conclusion of the race-relations cycle was a post-racial society in which success would be determined by individual merit. It was in this late twentieth century moment, then, that the conservative foundation of the canonical sociology of race finally became broadly apparent as the progressive argument for desegregation was easily appropriated by the Right in their arguments against affirmative action and other targeted social programs. This neoconservative rearticulation of the ethnicity paradigm influenced opinions on a wide range of political issues from welfare reform to urban renewal, and thus furthered the regressive shift from race-conscious to race-neutral public policy in the 1980s and 90s when *The White Boy Shuffle*

[117] Quoted in Steinberg 107.

is set. An era of colorblind legislation began after the decision in *Bakke v. The Regents of the University of California* (1978), which ruled against race-based admissions to the University's medical school and initiated a series of decisions similarly against affirmative action. The Supreme Court session in the year preceding the 1996 publication of *The White Boy Shuffle* was a radical, right-wing assault on racial equality.[118] In dubbing his protagonist after the popular social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, Beatty signals that his novel is a commentary on this troubled legacy of *Brown* and canonical US sociology in the post-civil rights era.

Myrdal was in fact part of the earliest debates about this transition toward race-neutrality in US public policy. While the teleology of *An American Dilemma* clearly pointed toward a post-racial vision of US society—race-based programs, like racially-biased laws were a violation of the "American creed"—in a roundtable discussion organized by *Commentary* magazine in 1964 entitled "Liberalism and the Negro," Myrdal made his views about "preferential" treatment of blacks explicit. He stated that he was "looking forward to a society which is color blind" ("Liberalism and the Negro" 30). As elsewhere, he preferred to speak in terms of an impoverished and unemployable "underclass"—a term Myrdal himself coined and that would become a racialized code word in discussions of urban poverty in the late twentieth century.[119] The sociologist Nathan Glazer, another panelist, pointed to statistics on the entry of blacks into the white-

[118] In *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995), the Rhenquist Court's five to four decision narrowly reinterpreted the decision in *Brown* as a mandate for intervention only in cases of *de jure* segregation regardless of *de facto* inequalities. In doing so, as Justice Clarence Thomas wrote in his concurring opinion, the Court upheld the colorblind principles of the landmark civil rights ruling. *Miller v. Johnson* further established the Court's position of race-neutrality by breaking up allegedly "racial gerrymandering" in congressional districts in Georgia, as did *Aderand Constructors, Inc. v Peña*, which concerned the awarding of contracts to disadvantaged minority groups, and undid a federal affirmative action program.

[119] As Myrdal writes in *The Challenge of Affluence* (1962), the "underclass" was a new phenomenon in American society, "not really an integrated part of the nation at all but a useless and miserable substratum" (35). While he introduced the term in a race-neutral context and emphasized its structural formation, the underclass developed into a coded term for lower-class blacks in following years.

collar work force in order to argue for the decreasing significance of race. As part of the same roundtable, James Baldwin expressed a far more pessimistic view, reminding his all-white co-discussants of the ways in which race continued to operate in everyday American society despite civil rights gains. As he put it bluntly: "I'm delighted to know there've been many fewer lynchings in the year 1963 than there were in the year 1933, but I also have to bear in mind—I have to bear it in mind because my life depends on it—that there are a great many ways to lynch a man" (31). The epigraph from Dick Gregory at the head of this sub-section offers a more concise and witty version of the same sentiment. Baldwin took particular aim at the immigrant analogy for African American experience in the United States, asserting that the experience of blacks was far different from other minority groups in terms of integration. The African American novelist also rejected the very terms of assimilation according to canonical sociology, the opposition of typical black pathology and white liberal professionalization: "If I had to choose between the way most white Americans live and my spareribs and my watermelon, then I would take my spareribs and watermelon. Of course, it's a choice I refuse to make" (38). The Commentary panel was full of a tension within American liberalism that would only become progressively stronger during the post-civil rights period. Glazer, for example, would eventually become known as a neoconservative.

Stephen Steinberg has called the post-civil rights move toward race neutrality the "liberal retreat" from race relations. Steinberg's account of racial politics in the second half of the twentieth century provides a critical context for understanding *The White Boy Shuffle*, particularly given the sociological genealogy he traces for contemporary public policy. For Steinberg, the turn away from a politics of race began in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, Steinberg asserts, institutional responsibility for the

"American dilemma" of race and democracy was believed to be absolved. In its place, individual pathology, specifically the breakdown of the black family, was blamed for the further struggles of African Americans. It was time, so the argument went, for blacks to literally "get their own house in order" (118). Steinberg accurately links this "blaming the victim" rhetoric to the work of sociologist and political adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and his notorious "report" on *The Negro Family*.[120] In his analysis of the "liberal retreat" from race in the post-civil rights era, Steinberg writes that the continued focus on the pathologies of African American culture, particularly in the debates surrounding the Moynihan "report," "exposed the conservative assumptions and racial biases that lurked behind mainstream social science" (120).[121] Following Moynihan's report, the conversation about the urban crisis was led by conservatives and concentrated on the behavior and values of the so-called underclass.

In the 1980s and 90s, the focus of debates around urban poverty moved toward culture and away from structure, toward the pathologies of inner-city blacks and away from the social systems that failed to support the urban poor. But even as the state claimed race neutrality as its guiding principle in matters of public policy, "culture" in this context came to function in the same way as biological understandings of race did nearly a century earlier before the social scientific interventions of Robert Park, Franz Boas, and others. Thus, for Adolph Reed, Charles Murray's explicitly biological arguments about racial intelligence in *The Bell Curve* are "almost indistinguishable" from William Julius Wilson's arguments about the culture of poverty in The Truly

[120] The phrase was originally coined by William Ryan in his critique of the Moynihan Report, *Blaming the Victim* (1972).

[121] As I have shown in my previous chapter, though it defined a later era in the US race relations, Moynihan's rhetoric has its origins in the early history of Chicago School sociology. Moreover, despite the controversy that ensued from the "report's" publication, Steinberg argues that Moynihan's pathological conception of the black family, with its absent black fathers and victimized black mothers, and inner city culture more broadly, is reproduced in the work of later sociologists like William Julius Wilson.

Disadvantaged (1987). As Reed writes in a review of *The Bell Curve* in *The Nation*, "the difference between racially inflected 'underclass' ideology and old-fashioned biological racism is more apparent than real" (662).[122] This slippage between the biological and the cultural is one that Beatty is clearly aware of in *The White Boy Shuffle*, published as it is at the height of racialized debates about welfare. When Gunnar finally publishes his first authorized collection of poems, he titles it *Watermelanin*, playing at once on cultural and biological assumptions about blackness, and, like Beatty's novel, eluding an easily consumable African American identity. Gunnar's equation of "watermelon"—an alleged favorite at the typical black picnic—and "melanin"—the compound that determines skin color in humans—that is, the equation between social and chemical markers of race, emphasizes the almost biological imposition of cultural expectations that Reed notes in his reading of the underclass debates.

For Steinberg, William Julius Wilson embodies the "liberal retreat" from race; as he writes, "if *An American Dilemma* was the 'exemplar study' of the pre-civil rights era, it is safe to say that [Wilson's] *The Declining Significance of Race* [1978] and *The Truly Disadvantaged* are the exemplar works of the post-civil rights era" (Steinberg 245, n. 51).[123] For my purposes, Wilson's research serves as an example of how Myrdal's formula continued to underwrite the putatively race-neutral public policy of the post-civil rights era that is the more immediate historical context for *The White Boy Shuffle*. Wilson relies heavily on conceptions of deviance unrevised since the institutionalization of canonical sociology at the University of Chicago fifty years before his tenure there

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[122] Elsewhere Reed elaborates on this shift in racial thinking, writing in *Progressive*: "'Culture,' which had previously stood for the principle of plasticity and contingency against 'nature,' seen as a region beyond human artifice, became just the opposite—a primordial realm that defines human populations by behaviors and attitudes and is resistant to social intervention" ("The New Victorians" 22).

[123] For Steinberg's critique of Wilson, see 123-6.

between 1972 and 1996.[124] His underclass model is a slight rearticulation of Myrdal's "distortion" of African American culture. As black middle class assimilation became not only possible, but normative in the aftermath of *Brown*, Wilson argues, the significance of race declined. While he does not deny the historical legacy of racial oppression, Wilson nonetheless deemphasizes "the easy explanation of racism," arguing that contemporary racism does not sufficiently explain the problem of urban poverty (*Truly* ix). According to Wilson, "Black middle-class exodus" from the inner city, occasioned by civil rights legislation, left behind a pathological "underclass" that fundamentally differed in behavior from mainstream US society (*Truly* 7). The regressive narrative of bourgeois homecoming in *The White Boy Shuffle* would seem to end the spatial and social isolation of the underclass in the inner-city according to Wilson's logic. But in this supposedly post-racial milieu, Beatty argues against sociological common sense for the continued significance of race, albeit a racial formation whose contours are more striated than the smooth binary logic of the canonical sociological paradigm. To begin with, the pathological image of the racialized underclass haunts the black middle-class in their migration out of the inner-city in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Secondly, the pathologized ghetto underclass itself is a kind of phantasm that cannot be located outside of the sociological imagination.[125] Largely set in postindustrial Los Angeles in the nineties, *The*

[124] For Roderick Ferguson, Wilson's liberal agenda in fact aligns with the arguments of conservative Charles Murray in "presenting heteropatriarchy as the remedy to poverty" (146). Moreover, he argues, *The Truly Disadvantaged* "arises out of and continues the normative genealogy of leftist critique" in its advocacy of middle-class values as the means of minority advancement (147).

[125] Even if more strategic than ideological, the explicit policy implication of Wilson's work was a turn away from race-conscious programs that began with the *Bakke* case, decided the same year that his *The Declining Significance of Race* was published. *Bakke* explicitly elided the history of racial oppression in the US. Reversing the logic of earlier findings that upheld desegregation, Justice F. Powell, Jr., writing for the majority, stated that it was beyond the jurisdiction of the Court to ameliorate past injustices. *Bakke* was the first of several late twentieth and early twenty-first century challenges to affirmative action programs that reinterpreted *Brown* as affirming race-neutrality. Not only did *Bakke* and other allegedly race-neutral legislation attempt to erase the historical legacies of racial discrimination in the US, they ignored the continued practices of racial discrimination as well.

White Boy Shuffle must thus be read in the context, not only of the ascendance of colorblind public policy, but within the corresponding widespread divestment in US cities in the second half of the twentieth century. The race-neutral social programs of the 1990s, ratified by the first primarily suburban electorate in US history, hid a highly racialized public policy regarding the inner city.[126] *The White Boy Shuffle* begins at the site of this erasure: the multicultural, yet colorblind suburbs.

Suburban Multiculturalism and the Specter of the Nigger

> There's like, a civil war going on with black people, and there's two sides: there's black people…and there's niggas…I love black people, but I hate niggas, brother! Oh, I hate niggas! Boy, I wish they'd let me join the Ku Klux Klan!
>
> - Chris Rock[127]

Nearly fifty years after *Brown*, the troubled legacy of that landmark civil rights decision is evident in *The White Boy Shuffle* through the awkward struggles of Gunnar, whom we first meet as the "funny, cool black guy" at the otherwise "all-white multicultural" Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary in Santa Monica, California (27, 28).[128] The melting pot rhetoric that underwrites Gunnar's school name hints at the pseudo-pluralism of Myrdal's integrated "American creed" with its allegiance pledged to the common culture of whiteness. Like Tommy Turner in Richard Wright's *A Father's*

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[126] In part due to shifting urban and suburban demographic patterns in the aftermath of *Brown* and other civil rights legislation—patterns that effectively segregated American citizens more than they had ever been—a new liberal-conservative consensus emerged in American racial politics. Thomas Byrne and Mary D. Edsall have traced these emergent patterns from the late sixties to the early nineties. They note the increasing power disparity between black inner cities and white suburbs. They claim that 1992 was the first election in US history to be decided by the suburban vote, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* 29.

[127] *Bring the Pain* (1996).

[128] In his history of African American LA, Josh Sides confirms that "like all suburban communities in Los Angeles County, Santa Monica had a long history of racial exclusion" though a significant demographic of African Americans did move to the independent city in the post-War era. See *L.A. City Limits* 146.

Law, Gunnar is the product of the significant migration of middle-class black families from the inner city to the suburbs beginning in the post-War era and particularly in the 1960s and '70s after the passage of new fair housing laws and other civil rights gains. If Wright uses Tommy to evidence the grotesque dimensions of such outward mobility, Gunnar Kaufman is a parody of assimilation, modeling the incomplete and problematic ethnicity paradigm. His namesake suggests that Gunnar's story should be the progressive narrative of race relations that was canonized by Myrdal in the 1940s, but instead *The White Boy Shuffle* adumbrates what Mary Pattillo-McCoy calls the "privilege and peril" of black middle-class suburban experience. Beatty thus questions one of the basic assumptions at the center of *An American Dilemma*: the categorical imperative of African American integration into middle-class white society.[129] Despite the supposedly post-racial, or at least race-neutral, context of the novel, race remains a "problem" for the bourgeois Gunnar in the twilight of the twentieth century. Even after the end of de jure segregation, he must still confront institutions of "de facto white privilege" and his own complicity with them.[130] While I maintain that Beatty subverts ethnography as a genre in his black fantasy novel, Gunnar's story does offer a corrective to what Pattillo-McCoy notes is a critical blind spot in sociological research so focused on the "looking for the 'real' nigga": the study of the African American middle class.

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[129] As Pattillo-McCoy writes in her *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (1999): "The upward strides of many African Americans into the middle class have given the illusion that race cannot be the barrier that some folks make it out to be. The reality, however, is that even the black and white *middle classes* remain separate and unequal" (2).

[130] Despite the formal equality handed down in *Brown*, Cheryl Harris argues institutions of "de facto white privilege" continue to delimit the success of that hallmark civil rights victory (1753). As Harris concludes in her section on the "mixed legacy" of *Brown* in "Whiteness as Property," the decision "held that the Constitution would not countenance legalized racial separation, but *Brown* did not address the government's responsibility to eradicate inequalities in resource allocation either in public education or other public services, let alone to intervene in inequities in the private domain, all of which are, in significant measure, the result of white domination" (1757).

For Richard Iton, the "privilege" of the African American middle class was in part based on distinguishing their "blackness" from the pathologies of the black underclass, the "black people" from the "niggas," in Chris Rock's words.[131] As Iton argues in the context of debates about welfare reform in the 1980s and 90s, the "trope of the nigger" was deployed in affirming the well-earned enfranchisement of the black bourgeoisie in contrast with an "undeserving" black underclass. Beatty published his first novel the same year that Bill Clinton passed the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, essentially dismantling the sixty-year-old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program that had begun as part of the New Deal, and the Kaufman family's assimilation is clearly predicated upon a similar rhetoric of middle-class respectability.[132] In the racialized discourse of citizenship surrounding welfare, Iton writes, "the nigger, the other, must be identified, isolated, and deployed in such a manner as to sustain a viable, marketable, assimilable, and respectable blackness" (181). This constitution of African American middle-class citizenship, however, only rehearses the sociological jurisprudence of *Brown*, and the citation of *An American Dilemma* in footnote 14 of the Court's decision, in its dependence on what Iton calls the "specter of 'the nigger'" (Iton 140). The rhetorical differentiation between the "real" niggas of the inner city and the suburban African American middle class, as well as the material realities that underlie this difference, continue to haunt the Kaufman family in *The White Boy Shuffle* just as they did the Turners in *A Father's Law*. In Beatty's novel, the Duboisian idea of the "talented tenth" has become a sitcom of the same name—"the show where a bunch of seddity motherfuckers be saving the community by rewarding exemplary African

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[131] For a reading of Rock's HBO comedy routine, *Bring the Pain*, see Iton 175-8.

[132] It was William Julius Wilson's arguments in *The Declining Significance of Race* and *The Truly Disadvantaged* that helped shape US public policy this and other issues when Wilson was an advisor to Clinton.

American citizenship with a piece of fried chicken" (145). The achievements of the black bourgeoisie are celebrated with prizes based on stereotypical, racial assumptions, their assimilation thus incomplete.

At first glance, Gunnar's suburban childhood appears without conflict. He writes, "My earliest memories bodysurf the warm comforting timelessness of the Santa Ana winds, whipping me in and around the palm-lined streets of Santa Monica. Me and the white boys…sharing secrets and bubble gum" (25). Yet, even in this account, Beatty hints at Gunnar's lack of agency and the ahistoricity of this idyllic setting. Just pages later, Gunnar describes how his "salt-air world began to subdivide into a series of increasingly complicated dichotomous relationships," "me and the world" becoming "us against them" (26). Gunnar's early experiences of these "dichotomous relationships" reflect the persistently binary process of US racial formation, a binary process not discontinued but reinforced through the "modern authority" of Myrdal's race-relations model. Despite the Kaufman family's assimilation into white suburbia and the post-racial politics of the time period, Gunnar is repeatedly reminded of his difference. Beatty titles the first section of the novel, set entirely in the suburbs, "Mama Baby, Papa Maybe," alluding to two of the most pervasive and contentious stereotypes of the contemporary underclass debates: the absent father and the single mother. At the time *The White Boy Shuffle* was published, this precise family structure was under much scrutiny as AFDC underwent reform. Gunnar's mother, though, is not a so-called "welfare queen," but a single and a hardworking nurse; as an LAPD officer, his divorced father is the professional opposite of the statistical figure of the black male criminal. But the Kaufmans are nonetheless satirically categorized by Beatty using the "tangle of pathologies" in Moynihan's black family portrait.

In the first chapter of *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty contextualizes Gunnar's middle-class suburban childhood within an account of the absurdly assimilationist Kaufman family tree intimately intertwined with major events of US history. Gunnar describes his lineage as "a long queue of coons, Uncle Toms, and faithful boogedy-boogedy retainers" (5). Beatty gives his protagonist's ancestors ridiculous European names and has them engage in ever more outrageous attempts at accommodating white American society. Rölf Kaufman, Gunnar's father, is the most recent model minority of the Kaufman clan. As a boy, he was allowed to attend "the exclusively white and predominantly redneck Jefferson Davis High," not because of the recent decision in *Brown*, but because he was so meek as to not be considered a threat. Rölf, though, is forced by his white classmates to act out scenes of racial violence from the civil rights movement, always portraying the victim. For this limited inclusion he is grateful. Later, he becomes a sketch artist and model for the LAPD, a position that exemplifies the "peril" of the black bourgeoisie: his municipal authority is ironically based on his racial resemblance to the criminalized urban poor. As Gunnar recollects, "I'd watch my father draw composite sketches for victimized citizens who used his face as a reference point" (10). Thus for all Rölf's professional success, based in part on his ability to laugh at the "nigger jokes" told by his fellow officers, he is daily compared with the pathological type of the "real" nigga (9). Like Ruddy in *A Father's Law*, the African American policeman is haunted by the criminality of his blackness, and his police work helps to exorcise this specter.

Like Tommy Turner, Gunnar benefits from the educational promise in *Brown* of the integrated classroom. But Beatty further critiques the sociological assumptions about assimilation and the black middle class through what he calls "classroom multiculturalism": the diversification of curricula that followed the legal integration of

the schools (28). The pedagogical pluralism of the multicultural curriculum was allegedly a reflection of the broader ideals and realities of a diverse US society. Like William Julius Wilson's related sociological arguments about the decreasing significance of race, though, "the eracist" pedagogy of Gunnar's teacher, Ms. Cegeny, recognizes race only to dismiss it. As Beatty writes, "classroom multiculturalism…reduced race, sexual orientation, and gender to inconsequence" (28). Lynn Itagaki argues that this humanist, colorblind curriculum in *The White Boy Shuffle* reflects contemporary race-neutral legislative decisions that elided the historical formation of racial difference. For Itagaki, Beatty's novel "directly confronts the unstable logic and internal contradictions of a colorblind ideology" like that legislated in *Bakke* that acknowledges racial difference only in a limited way (123).[133] In *Bakke*, the Court upheld a commitment to the concept of diversity so broadly defined that the particular contexts of social groups were irrelevant. As Gunnar describes classroom multiculturalism: "Everything was multicultural, but nothing was multicultural" (29).

Indeed, Gunnar's classroom itself, though desegregated, still reflects the racial barriers that remain despite his own opportunity. While the naming of Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary celebrates the universal teleology of the Chicago race-relations cycle in its suggestion of cultural inclusiveness, this assimilationist myth is undercut by the apparent token nature of the minorities at the school. The fact is that despite an integrated classroom and Ms. Cegeny's "eracist" pedagogy, Gunnar's suburban school remains essentially "all-white." His presence at Mongrel Elementary exemplifies the effects of legal desegregation, but the singularity of his blackness emphasizes that he is the limited fulfillment of a promise and thus an exception to the rule. His inclusion is part

[133] See Itagaki 121-173.

of a larger exclusion. In fact, US schools were more segregated in the post-civil rights era than they were in the years immediately following the decision in *Brown*.[134] In the 1990s, Supreme Court decisions like *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995) were slowing continued efforts at school desegregation.[135] Furthermore, the Kaufman family's presence in Santa Monica is similarly statistically insignificant given demographic shifts in the second half of the twentieth century; despite the end of de jure segregation, the US remained largely segregated into white suburbs and black ghettos.[136]

The forgotten facts of US racial formation, though, are evident in the continued cultural currency of racial identity in what Beatty refers to as "schoolyard multiculturalism," in which, as Gunnar relates, "the kids who knew the most Polack, queer, and farmer's daughter jokes ruled" (28). Even in more friendly contexts, Gunnar is defined by his identity as the "funny, cool black guy," his racial difference thus reproduced with each seemingly benign reference. Beatty breaks down the racialized semantics of the referent as follows: "In Santa Monica, like most predominantly white

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[134] A recent report released by The Civil Rights Project concluded: "Fifty-five years after the *Brown* decision, blacks and Latinos in American schools are more segregated than they have been in more than four decades" (3). See Orfield, Gary, *Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge* (2009).

[135] This trend has continued recently in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007). As schools continued to struggle against "de facto" forces of racial isolation, the Supreme Court took a major step backwards in denying two districts in Seattle and Louisville the right to diversify their classrooms (*Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, Kentucky, was decided with *PICS*). Both districts had considered race as a factor in the placement of students in schools in an effort to *prevent* re-segregation. In what dissenting Justice John Paul Stevens identified as the "cruel irony" of the Court's decision, conservative defenders invoked the legacy of *Brown*. If the use of race was unconstitutional in segregation, they argued, so was it unconstitutional in desegregation. As Clarence Thomas wrote simply, "What was wrong in 1954 cannot be right today." For Thomas, both *Parents Involved v. Seattle District No. 1* and *Brown* uphold the ideal of a color-blind constitution and further a politics that believes that a colorless society is the apotheosis of American democracy. This Supreme Court decision is perhaps the most significant one in an era, beginning at the close of the last century, that has been increasingly defined by a deracialization of politics bookending the major successes of the Civil Rights Movement.

[136] Forty years after the Fair Housing Act (1968), the National Commission on Fair Housing "exposed the fact that despite strong legislation, past and ongoing discriminatory practices in the nation's housing and lending markets continue to produce levels of residential segregation that result in homeownership attainment and asset accumulation." See "The Future of Fair Housing" v.

sanctuaries from urban blight, 'cool black guy' is a versatile signifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile while maintaining politically correct semiotics" (27). "Cool black guy" thus exemplifies the continued racial coding of the post-civil rights era, in which race-neutral public policies were in fact highly racialized. Within the specific regional context of the white suburbs, the signifier contains a veiled reference to the "real" niggas of the inner city. While his racialization as a "harmless black male" lacks the pathological force of the violent black male stereotype, his acceptance within the suburban social hierarchy is nonetheless dependent on that specter. When one of Ms. Cegeney's multicultural lessons is interrupted in order for the students to be tested for colorblindness, Gunnar asks the doctor, "Our teacher says we're supposed to be colorblind. That's hard to do if you can see color, isn't it?" The doctor explains that the teacher meant "just pretend that you don't see color. Don't say things like 'Black people are lecherous, violent, natural-born criminals'" (32). This description clearly does not apply to the bourgeois Gunnar; the doctor nonetheless recognizes him as a new, post-civil rights era type: "one of those funny cool black guys" (31). Nonetheless, in the middle of a test for colorblindness, Gunnar learns that despite the multicultural curriculum of Mongrel Elementary and the decreasing significance of race in US public policy, racial formation remains central to the construction of US citizenship.[137] The emergent type of the "cool black guy" evidences the costly process of middle-class ascension: Gunnar Kaufman's bourgeois inclusion is contingent upon a pathological

[137] In this scene, Gunnar is "mugged by a metaphor," as Wahneema Lubiano calls it. Lubiano describes the process as follows: Whether or not I am a card-carrying believer in distinctions of racial biology, I am nonetheless attacked by the hegemonic social formation's notions of racial being and the way those notions position me in the world. Like a mugging, this attack involves an exchange of assets: some aspect of the social order is enriched domestically and internationally by virtue of material inequities stabilized and narrativized by race oppression and I lose symbolically and monetarily. Further, I am physically traumatized and psychologically assaulted by an operation that is mystified. It goes on in the dark, so to speak—in the dark of a power that never admits to its own existence (64).

conception of blackness, the deviant figure of the "real" nigga. Moreover, the political correctness of Gunnar's public acceptance hides the fact that the urban poor are still racialized and criminalized. Such a racial regime follows the formula of the Chicago School ethnicity paradigm, acknowledging the foundational pluralism of the US nation-state, but simultaneously basing citizenship on assimilation to a normative center.

Most troubling about Gunnar's childhood is the psychological damage that he evidently retains despite, or perhaps because of, his apparent integration into white society. Gunnar's lingering negative self-image refutes the social-psychological basis of *Brown*, which was in fact rearticulated in arguments for the multicultural curriculum in the 1980s.[138] The assumption of the famous Clark doll study that Justice Warren cited in footnote eleven of the Court's decision was that the self-esteem issues evident in the young black test subjects were the result of segregation. Within the "multicultural" suburb of *The White Boy Shuffle*, though, whiteness remains dominant and exceptional racial others like Gunnar are never able to fully integrate. Though he imagines a "White Gunnar" who enjoys a relatively carefree youth in Santa Monica, whiteness is ultimately "the expulsion of colors encumbered by self-awareness and pigment." Gunnar cannot escape the double-consciousness of his own blackness, a fact of which he is made constantly aware, even if he does not fully understand it. As Gunnar recounts, black is "an unwanted dog abandoned in the forest who finds its way home by fording flooded rivers and hitchhiking in the beds of pickup trucks and arrives at its destination only to be taken for a car ride to the desert" (35). The young protagonist further associates blackness with a vague, "repressed memory" of abuse, possibly involving his father (36). In this

[138] Bergner writes in "Black Children, White Preference: *Brown v. Board*, the Doll Tests, and the Politics of Self-Esteem," "In the late 1980s, as the neoliberal backlash against race-conscious equalization policies such as affirmative action gained force, researchers again conducted doll tests, this time finding *white* preference among African American children and cause to argue for a multicultural school curriculum" (301).

sexual victimization and his idealization of whiteness, Beatty's protagonist might be read as another post-*Brown* version of Toni Morrison's Pecola from The Bluest Eye, who is also sexually abused by her father and who also imagines whiteness as unburdened by such racialized trauma. Gunnar's "white boy shuffle" signifies the loss of "soul" or "funk" that Morrison, in her Black Arts politics, associates with unassimilated blackness.[139]

Gunnar's racial self-esteem issues are evident in his siblings as well. When one of Gunnar's sisters comes home from a YMCA camp field trip crying because she mistakenly believes the other children on the bus were cheering "Yeah, white camp! Yeah, white camp," Ms. Kaufman offers to send the kids to an all-black camp. Gunnar and his sisters, though, beg their mother not to because, as the children plead in chorus, "they're different from us" (37). This incident leads Ms. Kaufman to pack up and move the family from the supposedly "utopian" suburbs of Santa Monica to the inner-city ghetto of West Los Angeles in order for her children to live the realities of, as Gunnar puts it, "'vaunted black experience'" (46). As Richard Iton asks of the intra-racial dynamics of this post-civil rights era identity crisis, "if blackness is defined against middle-class possibilities—or more broadly, if the nigger is constructed in opposition to the citizen—how will those closest to these borders identify, and constitute themselves?" (165). This is a question that *The White Boy Shuffle* takes very seriously in its fantasy of the black bourgeoisie migrating to the ghetto and attempting to assimilate into inner-city African American culture. Mrs. Kaufman moves her family not only to invert the discourse of black middle-class respectability as it was constructed on the "trope of the

[139] In analysis of the character of Geraldine from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Douglas discusses the concept of funk as biological trait that can nonetheless be lost through cultural assimilation. Morrison introduces Geraldine to the reader as a typology, included in a generalized "they," black women attempting to Americanize, "to get rid of the funkiness" (82). See Douglas's "What *The Bluest Eye* Knows about Them" 141-168.

nigger," but to invert the very material processes by which suburban comfort was built on inner-city suffering. Their move to the ghetto gives Gunnar the opportunity to come face to face with the pathological racial type of the "real" nigga that his "funny cool black guy" has been defined against. When he first arrives in the ghetto, however, Gunnar initially views his neighbors and neighborhood through the lens of racial pathology.

Charles Barkley and the Epistemological Excesses of Ghetto Ethnography

> I'm a '90s nigga. I told you white boys you never heard of a '90s nigga. We do what we want to.
>
> - Charles Barkley[140]

When his mother moves the family from predominantly white Santa Monica to inner-city West Los Angeles so that her son can learn what it means to be "black," Gunnar's bourgeois awkwardness within his new ghetto culture is expressed as an ethnographic distance. His first descriptions of the fictional Hillside neighborhood read like a field journal: "I ventured forth into my new environs and approached a boy about my age who wore an immaculately pressed sparkling white T-shirt and khakis and was slowly pacing one slue-footed black croker-sack shoe in front of the other" (41). Initially, Gunnar views his neighbors as "real" niggas familiar to him from his education in "schoolyard multiculturalism." As Beatty writes of his own experience moving from suburb to city:

> I started thinking, "I get it, these is the niggers the white folks in Santa Monica thought I was." I finally had a reference group for all the slurs and the bullshit I had tolerated for nine years. I didn't know what a nigger was, only that I shouldn't be one. ("What Set" 40)

[140] "Sixers' Charles Barkley Raps 'Racist' Media."

But one of many ironies in *The White Boy Shuffle* is that Gunnar searches for cultural "authenticity" through a social scientific construction of black identity that has misrepresented African American communities for generations. The singular pathological image of "Negro" culture in Myrdal's study does not prepare Gunnar for the diversity of blacknesses that he experiences throughout the novel, nor does it help him account for his own complex racial identity. As with Tommy's research on Chicago's Black Belt in the 1950s, Gunnar's mock-ethnography of 1990s, inner-city LA evidences only a representative excess—what he observes there cannot be contained within the limitations of the genre. *The White Boy Shuffle* itself can be read as a mock ethnography, at once adopting the tropes of a social science text, but the novel demonstrates the limits of sociological readings of black culture through a satirical and fantastic portrayal of contemporary African American urban life.

On his first day of school at Manischewitz Junior High, Gunnar is given access to his permanent file and learns that his background ideally suits him for the role of ethnographic informant. The dossier reads: "Despite his race, subject possesses remarkable intelligence and excellent reasoning and analytic skills…with the proper patriotic encouragement Gunnar Kaufman will make an excellent undercover CIA agent" (61). Gunnar, then, is placed in the position of the professional intellectual of color, the ideal of canonical sociology and civil rights legislation. As with the contributors to Myrdal's study, Gunnar is praised for his rationality, a result no doubt of his training in the integrated suburban school system. But for Beatty, the young Gunnar's promise as a sociologist of race only guarantees his employment in a state-sanctioned project of surveiling the unreasoning and unreasonable urban poor. Moreover, Gunnar's ethnographic assignment fails to establish firm boundaries between the rational and the pathological, the normal and the deviant as the fantastic characters that he finds at

Manischewitz and in Hillside exceed the typologies of the underclass popularized by late twentieth-century sociological public policy discourse.

Sitting in his homeroom at Manischewitz on the first day of school, Gunnar attempts to catalog his new classmates according to types like "marsupial mama's boys and girls," "reformed and borderline students," and "fly guys and starlets." But he soon realizes the futility of the exercise:

> As my classmates yelled out their schedules and passed contraband across the room, I couldn't classify anyone by dress or behavior. The boisterous were just as likely to be in the academically enriched classes as the silent. The clotheshorses stood as much chance as being on a remedial track as the bummy kids with brown bag lunches. (62-63)

The young black social scientist attempts to read his fellow students' behavior according to sociological paradigms of the pathological and the assimilable. But even within that allegedly homogenous demographic of minority youth there is a significant diversity. From the names the teacher calls out in attendance, it is also clear that Gunnar's inner-city classroom is far more "multicultural" than at Mongrel Elementary. Throughout *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty emphasizes the "polycultural" makeup of the Hillside community; blacks, Hispanics, and Koreans all reside there.[141] Gunnar's failed attempt to typologize his classmates has a corollary in his fantastic characterizations of the failed ethnographer's eventual friends. Nicholas Scoby, the "thuggish boy" who sits in the back of the class with his headphones on and who Gunnar first describes as "an autistic hoodlum," is not listening to rap, but to the history of jazz (66). In his cross-generational

[141] In his *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (2002), Vijay Prashad uses the term to distinsguish a soft multiculturalism from pluralism. As Prashad writes, "Polyculturalism, unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of host of lineages—the task of the historian is not to carve out the lineages but to make sense of how people live culturally dynamic lives" (xi-ii).

musical interests, including the improvisations of jazz within a history of black music that continues to hip hop, Scoby exceeds popular sociological expectations of urban youth.[142]

Like an ethnographer, Gunnar studies the semiotics of inner-city speech and clothing styles in order to enter more fully into the "street" culture of West Los Angeles and the foreign subculture of "streetball." Beatty's book itself at times appears like a social science text with section headings such as "The Shoes," "The Haircut," and "The Ball," detailing Gunnar's inner-city LA rite of passage as an observer to a participant-observer of the rituals of basketball. When his son appears to be slipping into a dangerously intimate relationship with his objects of study Rölf reinforces the distance of the sociological gaze by giving the aspiring ballplayer a paperback copy of sports journalist Rick Telander's *Heaven Is a Playground* (1993) with the inscription: "Read this and remember you're a Kaufman, and not one of the black misfits sociologically detailed therein" (92).[143] Gunnar, though, cannot maintain the cultivated distance of the scientific observer. He must, as his friend Scoby tells him later, get "involved" (87).

Gunnar's best friend does fulfill an inner-city stereotype in his exceptional basketball skills. In fact, Scoby becomes the object of multiple social scientific studies because he has never missed a shot. As Gunnar describes the phenomenon, scholars "show up for games, full of anticipatory schadenfreude, armed with computer printouts calculating the odds of Scoby's missing his next shot…Invariably, Scoby goes six for six and leaves them in tears, ripping their papers to shreds and cursing epistemology" (192).

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[142] In the late 1980s and early '90s, the years before *The White Boy Shuffle* was published, MCs like Q-Tip and Talib Kweli, among others, defined themselves against the mainstream image of the rapper as a stylized version of the gangster. Many of these rap groups in fact heavily sampled jazz music to in part signal this distinction—gangster rap being defined by the G-Funk of Dr. Dre's Death Row label's productions. The Native Tongues collective that included Tip's group, A Tribe Called Quest, is often associated with so-called "jazz rap."

[143] For a closer reading of the role of basketball in the novel, see Tracy Curtis's "Basketball Demands in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*."

Beatty here mocks the statistical analysis of black behavior used by sociologists like Hernstein and Murray to argue for the pathology of inner-city culture; Scoby humorously frustrates such biometrics with the improbability of his scoring streak. Hyperaware of how the alleged failures of the black community are interpreted sociologically in the popular discourse of the underclass, Scoby believes he has to be perfect and defy statistical estimations in order to avoid criticism. But as Gunnar remarks during one of Scoby's lower moments, "Sometimes the worst thing a nigger can do is perform well" (118). Toward the end of the novel, Scoby jumps off of a Boston University building to his death, writing in his suicide note, "I can feel hands on my back, slowly pushing" (206).[144] Scoby's character embodies the very real-life pressures of the African American male athlete whose athletic and racial performances are the object of constant scrutiny along racialized lines not dissimilar from those drawn in discussions of the culture of poverty.

The assimilation narrative of basketball professionalization can be articulated in terms of Myrdal's "American dilemma" opposing rational ordered behavior and disorganized, pathological behavior; the "street" moves of the basketball phenom must fit into the white coach's game plan. To some extent it is this professionalization narrative of the basketball stardom that troubles Scoby about his own success on the court. At one point Scoby complains, echoing Charles Barkley's famous statement that he was "not a role model," "I'm not no fucking Tiki doll, no fucking icon. Don't folks have anything better to do with their lives than pay attention to what I'm doing? (118).[145] Scoby's

[144] In his first year as head coach of the LA Lakers, Phil Jackson gave his star Kobe Bryant a copy of *The White Boy Shuffle* as part of a tradition that he had begun while with the Bulls of giving players books relevant to the personalities—the same year he gave Shaquille O'Neal *Ecce Homo*. Kobe thought the gift an affront.

[145] As an NBA player, Barkley rejected the progressive sociological narrative of assimilation as it was articulated in professional basketball, while his contemporary, Michael Jordan, represented the easily assimilable black athletic superstar. Jordan's well-known 1992 Gatorade spot featured a chorus of

plotline of basketball stardom can be read as a version of the canonical sociological professionalization narrative with its own politics of respectability. Particularly in the 1990s, the NBA policed black masculinity so that its athletes would represent a certain image of African American success. Charles Barkley became a kind of anti-role model in his rejection of any pretense of bourgeois respectability—Chuck D referenced him in Public Enemy's "Rebel Without a Pause," declaring "I'll throw it down your throat like Barkley."[146] Barkley's apparently contradictory persona was best captured in his well-known statement to a group of white reporters: "I'm a '90s nigga. I told you white boys you've never heard of a '90s nigga. We do what we want to" (Qtd. in Boyd "The Day the Niggaz Took Over").[147] Barkley here seems to acknowledge the specter of the nigger in his own popular image. In rejecting any clear distinction between his privilege as a basketball star and these pathological hauntings, Barkley articulates a complex vision of black personhood that critiques the binary system of sociological racial identification.

For Beatty, Barkley's persona in the 1990s presented a descriptive excess that could not be contained within a single typological figure. When the author composed a "Beatty Scale of Quintessential Blackness," the "The Round Mound of Rebound" appeared in every category of African American identity. The "Beatty Scale" appears in a personal essay entitled "What Set You From, Fool?" in which the author explores issues of racial typology or stereotyping at length. Beatty begins with the observation that "the

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multicultural children singing, "Like Mike, if I could be like Mike." In contrast to the wholesome, all-American construction of Jordan's image, Barkley famously declared in a Nike 1993 commercial, "I am not a role model. I'm not paid to be a role model. I'm paid to wreak havoc on basketball court. Parents should be role models. Just because I dunk a basketball, doesn't mean I should raise your kids."

[146] *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1987).

[147] As Todd Boyd has argued, Barkley's statement here expresses a "liberated notion traditionally associated with rich white males that Barkley, as a consequence of his own financial status, could now claim as well, but in a specifically Black way" (*Am I Black Enough?* 33). For more on Barkley's complicated performances of the trope of the nigger, see Boyd's "The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity Culture, and Black Masculinity" from *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity* 123-41.

world is gang related" (a "set" is another term for gang). While he is writing in part about the significance of gang affiliations in his Los Angeles childhood, Beatty also suggests the idea of the "gang" as a metaphor, inclusive of all the groups with which we choose to identify as well as "Other social sets [that] jump us against our wills" (38). The author thus implicates ghetto ethnographers and public policy makers with the vernacular of urban everyday life as Kelley does with his play on the dozens in *Yo' Mama's Dysfunktional*. Following Beatty's analogy, the typologies of social science enact their own violence: they reduce the complexity of everyday human experience to two dimensions. As Kelley writes, "By conceiving black urban culture in the singular, interpreters unwittingly reduce their subjects to cardboard typologies who fit neatly into their own definition of the 'underclass' and render invisible a wide array of complex cultural forms" (17). Beatty, though, playfully rehearses the categorizations of sociological discourse in "The Beatty Scale of Quintessential African American Blackness" that accompanies the essay. As Beatty introduces the chart, "Unlike the ancestry-based octaroon, quadroon, zebra-roon, fullroon race-purity measure, the Beatty scale has a degree of Africaness quivalent to Kelvin's absolute zero. Unfortunately, the only absolute Africans were those primordial sunfolk" (46). The "Beatty Scale" thus inverts categories of hypodescent in US racial formation—measured in decreasing degrees of whiteness and increasing degrees of absurdity—along the lines of pure blackness. Yet the author ultimately critiques such essentialist metrics.

At first glance, it appears that Beatty has categorized famous African Americans along a spectrum from nationalist to assimilationist, moving from "Jet Black" to "Flat Black" to "Glossy Black" to "Gray." The "Jet Black" category includes more radical black figures like Nat Turner, while the "Grey" includes more conservative ones, like Clarence Thomas. But the apparent racial essentialism of the chart breaks down with

Bruce Lee and Crazy Horse in the "Jet Black" category and in the inclusion of other non-African American figures throughout. By multiplying the categories of blackness and then destabilizing those categories, Beatty critiques the rigid process of sociological identity formation. Indeed, after the "Beatty Scale of Quintessential Blackness," Myrdal's binary framework of black pathology and white assimilation clearly cannot contain the likes of Charles Barkley. *The White Boy Shuffle* negotiates this spectrum of blackness as well, describing and deconstructing the multiplicity of subject positions available to African Americans, but simultaneously mocking the sociological attempt to easily categorize black culture in types. In the novel, Gunnar repeatedly attempts and repeatedly fails to successfully identify himself with a variety of racial subject positions.

At one point in *The White Boy Shuffle*, exhausted by his attempts to align his own blackness with that of the "real" niggas in his new ghetto neighborhood, Gunnar escapes from the city by "playing Thoreau in the Montgomery Ward department store over in the La Cienega Mall, turning its desolate sporting goods department into a makeshift Walden" (53-54). Punning on the racial and spiritual meanings of "soul," Gunnar mocks his racial awkwardness, his "white" lack of funk, by suggesting he "needed a more transcendental approach to locating [his] soul" (53).[148] Like Thoreau, Gunnar imagines the Walden at the department store as a buffer against the apparent expanding disintegration of the city; camped out in the outdoors section, he reads the classics of Western civilization as if in defense against the savagery of inner-city culture.[149]

[148] Beatty's book title refers to the fact that the protagonist "suffer[s] from what the American Psychiatric Association *Manual of Mental Disorders* lists as social arrhythmia," or inability to dance, presumably a symptom of his suburban, "white" upbringing (121). The best he can do when his friends take him to inner-city dance clubs later in the novel is to perform "the white boy shuffle," a move that does not "disrupt the groove" but is devoid of "funk" (123). Gunnar's racial identity is coded bodily in dance and, more specifically, in the category of "funk"; his lack of "funk" is racialized as "white," signifying his post-racial cultural inheritance.

[149] In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), the early-nineteenth century town or city is where the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation"; the pond and the woods are a retreat from this new urbanizing threat

Ironically, though, Gunnar is pursued even in this artificial countryside by the local street gang, the Gun Totin' Hooligans, and finds himself in a scene out of, as he says, a "PBS documentary titled *Our Youth at Risk* or something equally forlorn" (57). His return to the rich pastoral tradition within US literature and to his own idyllic suburban childhood fails as he finds himself squarely in the middle of the ubiquitous gang narrative of the contemporary inner city. Gunnar imagines his middle-class mother indignantly asking "What they talking about 'our youth'? Those aren't my kids, and if they were, they'd damn sure be at risk." But Gunnar, still searching for acceptance in his new urban neighborhood, writes, "I'd never thought that one day I would be in the center of a maelstrom of 'our youth,' pacifying myself with thoughts of possible acceptance into their world" (57). Still, Gunnar attempts to structure his first encounter with gang culture through the language of ethnography; he contemplates whether his own beating is a "jumping-in ritual" that will allow him inside access to the Hillside "tribe" (53). Given his primarily suburban background at this early point in the novel, Gunnar's only reference is the sociologically-inflected TV news coverage of the urban minority youth.[150] But Beatty's staging of Gunnar's confrontation with inner-city gangs in a shopping mall further emphasizes that these images of "street" culture are inorganic products of consumer culture. The Gun Totin' Hooligans are like the mannequins in the

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to the transcendentalist "soul" (15). Thus for many critics, Thoreau is a key figure in the anti-urban tradition of American letters. See, for example, Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985) 68-72. Thoreau wrote in 1962, "A man's health…requires as many acres of meadow to this prospect as his farm does loads of muck" (Qtd. in Jackson 68). Numerous critics have noted an "anti-urban bias" in US culture more broadly. The American metropolis has been conceived by commentators as apocalyptic since at least the end of the nineteenth century. As James Kyung-Jin Lee writes, "The American city begets literary casuists: those who, like screaming street-corner preachers, toll God's wrath, natural disaster, or blank lives to readers who might have eyes to see" ("City as Region" 137).

[150] As Macek argues, exposes on the rise in "youth crime" were typical of the ways in which television news constructed the city as a nightmare landscape. See 156-161. Using data from the Vanderbilt Television News Index, Macek finds that over fifty percent of news stories on Los Angeles in 1997, the year after *The White Boy Shuffle* was published, were about crime (151).

shopping mall display, simulacrum, cultural representations without any clear referent in everyday life. Part of what structures this distance between the hyperreality of the suburban media landscape and the reality of urban black experience is structural abandonment of the inner city.[151] Beatty, though, is not only concerned with how African American identity is policed in popular discourse, but with the literal policing of black bodies in public space.

Building on W.E.B. Du Bois's central metaphor and metonym in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the "color line"—the line that could allegedly be crossed after the *Brown* decision and was perhaps further erased by the multicultural curriculum—James Kyung-Jin Lee notes that "it is much easier to cross a metaphorical line than to break down real walls" (xiv). In his *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* (2004), Lee works to "recover an urban palimpsest from celebrations of easy multicultural promises and even easier visions of racial pathologies" (xxix). Beatty engages in a similar recovery effort in his novel, symbolized in the Kaufman's relocation from suburban Santa Monica to inner-city West Los Angeles. Their move is occasioned by the failure of that easy multicultural narrative of black assimilation and occasions the failure of pathological narratives of inner-city black pathology. For Lee, multiculturalism is itself a kind of "triage," a cultural corollary to economic divestment in US cities in the final decades of the twentieth century. As he notes at the beginning of his project, the rise of multiculturalism corresponded to a decline in attention to the lived experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. The Kaufmans' assimilation is also a kind of triage, their limited middle-class privilege obscuring ongoing struggles of the black inner city.[152] What

[151] Here, of course, I am invoking the vocabulary of Jean Baudrillard, and particularly his definition of the simulacrum as an image with "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (6).
[152] Nancy Fraser's differentiation between "recognition" and "redistribution" is also helpful here. See "From Redistribution to Recognition: Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age": 68-93.

emerges, then, in the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s, is a critical disjunction between representation and resource. This contradiction is in part what is so problematic about the generic designation of Gunnar's poetry as "street"; in his critique of the ethnographic imperative for black fiction, Beatty, like many of the authors in Lee's study, demonstrates a distinct anxiety about the disparity between cultural celebration and economic restructuring.[153] One of the critical ironies in *The White Boy Shuffle* and in the post-civil rights era more broadly is that sociological renderings of the "reality" of inner-city black culture as pathologically unintegrated and disintegrating continue despite the equally sociologically-informed assimilation narrative of the late twentieth century as a "post-racial" moment. The nation's multicultural vision of itself allowed for the celebration of minority authors even as the populations they were thought to represent were abandoned by the state. It is this post-industrial history that Gunnar excavates from the palimpsest of the contemporary urban landscape when his mother moves the family from Santa Monica to West Los Angeles, from the suburbs to the inner city.

[153] While Beatty is only briefly mentioned in Lee's book, it was in his graduate seminar that I was first introduced to *The White Boy Shuffle* and in continued conversation with him that I have developed many of the readings in this chapter.

Chapter 4

The Hip Hop Novel and "Keeping it (Sur)real"

Seeing Rodney King, Hearing Rap Music: From the Scopophilic to the Metasonic

> We're talking about a justice system that had five hundred people whose cases were overturned by DNA evidence. I seen a tape where five cops beat up a nigga and they said that they had a reasonable doubt. I got my doubts too! All right? How come they never found Biggie and Tupac's murderers, but they could arrest O.J. the next day. Nicole Simpson can't rap!
>
> - Dave Chappelle[154]

When the sheltered Gunnar first arrives in the inner-city Los Angeles, he is immediately visited by the "black-and-white Welcome Wagon" of the LAPD, "dressed to oppress," to determine his gang affiliation. His mother is pleased that he is "finally getting a bitter taste of her vaunted 'traditional black experience'" (46). Just as he is later read as a "street poet" by his creative writing classmates, Gunnar is read as "gangster" by the LAPD despite his suburban upbringing, a signal of the disconnect between the LAPD's racial profiling tactics and the lived reality of inner-city blackness. To emphasize this slippage between statistic and person, Beatty describes Gunnar's first police harassment as a surreal out-of-body experience not unlike Du Bois's John in *The Souls of Black Folk*—a college-educated black man who is lynched upon return to the South. While Beatty critiques the concepts of racial authenticity and ethnographic realism throughout *The White Boy Shuffle*, the satirical description of Gunnar's initial encounter with the LAPD suggests that there is something absurdly and tragically typical about minority youth struggles against law enforcement. As social historian Mike Davis writes of Los Angeles in the 1990s, "As a result of the war on drugs every non-Anglo teenager in Southern California is now a prisoner of gang paranoia and associated demonology" (284). It is this carceral experience of blackness within the urban crisis of the 1990s that the Kaufman family legacy of social mobility partially erases, but that Gunnar comes face

[154] "Jury Selection" (2004).

to face with in West Los Angeles. Gunnar's interrogation by the LAPD places him within the major conflict between inner-city youth and urban police departments, so central to the conflicting discourses of the culture of poverty and hip hop music. In the early 1990s, these conflicts became nationally visible with the video-taped beating of Rodney King and then again with the riots that ensued after the acquittal of the LAPD officers who assaulted him.

Though dismissed as riots in the mainstream media, the LA Uprising was an organized protest against the ongoing systematic abuse of inner-city minorities by the LAPD throughout the preceding decades, most recently in Operation Hammer, a sweeping police initiative to crack down on gang activity in the city.[155] As the rapper Ice Cube said at the time of the riots, "It's been happening for years. It's just we didn't always have a camcorder when it happened" (Qtd. in Kelley, "Straight from the Underground").[156] Indeed, Los Angeles "gangsta" rap had long been responding to the militarization of the LAPD with it's own brand of militant hip hop music. Ice Cube's rap group Niggaz Wit Attitude released their "Fuck da Police" just a year after Operation Hammer went into effect. In the opening skit for the track, the group establishes an alternative court system in which to try the police department and the expansion of the carceral state more broadly. Indeed, the law-and-order initiatives critiqued by NWA were part of a larger policy of malignant neglect of the inner-city in the age or urban crisis: the

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[155] The use of the term "uprising" by Robert Gooding-Williams, editor of *Reading Rodney King*, challenges the conception of the allegedly senseless violence of the riots in opposition to the state violence legitimated by the acquittal. The word choice also realigns that protest with civil rights movement activism. Furthermore, the revised terminology reinterprets what took place on the streets of LA not as evidence in an argument for the continued pathologization of the urban poor, but, in fact, as an expression of a level of social organization, of culture in the positive sense, so often denied the citizens of the inner city in typical sociological accounts. As Gunnar describes the looters in *The White Boy Shuffle*: "The absolute lack of chaos was amazing. Instead of a horde of one-eyed brigands pillaging and setting fires, the looters were very courteous and the plundering was orderly" (135).

[156] For an extensive list of news articles cataloging such abuse, see Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 183 n.5. For more on Hammer, see Davis 267-322.

retraction of social programs that meaningfully addressed the problem of urban minority populations, what Michael Hardt and Atonio Negri call the transition from the "welfare state" to "warfare state" (17).[157] As Dave Chappelle observes in the above epigraph, the technocracy of the modern criminal justice system failed to even distribute social justice. As more overtly politically-minded rap groups such as NWA and Public Enemy make clear, like the LA riots, hip hop emerged in the late 1970s and '80s as a grass-roots social and aesthetic movement reacting to the urban crisis of those decades, though the music was similarly dismissed as "riotous" by its critics. *The White Boy Shuffle* is a hip hop novel, first and foremost, because it too is written in direct response to the shifting social, economic, and political conditions of the postindustrial city.[158]

Yet within the social scientific discourse that often framed conservative critiques of rap music, the angry, profanity-laden social commentary of groups like NWA were often analyzed as menacing proof of the larger social problems of the inner-city rather than as addressing such social problems themselves. As Zadie Smith has written recently in a *New York Times* profile of the rapper Jay-Z, for those that view rap as a social problem, "rap language is more scandalous than the urban deprivation rap describes" (112). Rap music, with its excessive bass and seemingly nihilistic attitude, exemplifies the irrational "distortion" of American values in "Negro" culture, to use Gunnar Myrdal's framework. For many conservative critics, rappers were blamed for generating these pathologies through their music. But contemporary critiques of hip hop culture can be traced to the long history of sociological imaginings of black culture as pathological.[159]

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[157] Here I play on the urban policy of "benign neglect" proposed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served as Nixon's urban affairs adviser in the late 1960s.

[158] Here I am following S. Craig Watkins's understanding of hip hop broadly defined as a "generational discourse" (67).

[159] For a thorough critique of this position that rap music evidences the pathology of black culture, see Rose, *Hip Hop Wars* 61-74.

The irony here is that hip hop culture becomes ethnographic evidence of the lack of culture among African Americans, their impoverished culture or their culture of poverty, rather than as a complex aesthetic form. Rather than hearing NWA's critique of the racism of the American justice system, this social scientific analysis of gangsta rap only saw black criminality, and these images were then deployed to further conservative tough-on-crime arguments for increased policing of inner-city populations.

Another way to articulate this tension within debates about hip hop culture, given the historical legacies of canonical sociology under discussion here, is that rap music is often seen, but rarely heard, overproduced through a social scientific lens as objective evidence of the immiseration of inner-city values, but never given a proper hearing as a sophisticated sonic product of real-life disenfranchised urban youth. Houston Baker argues that the televised beating of Rodney King was a repeat of a historical pattern in American race relations in which blacks are presented as highly visible but utterly silent. In this context, Baker calls for more serious consideration of the cultural work of rap music, promoting what he calls a metasonic hermeneutic for hip hop. As he writes, "A hearing of Rodney G. King can commence with a hearing of rap music" (48). In this chapter, I listen to *The White Boy Shuffle* as a hip hop novel to develop a metasonic hearing of the culture of poverty. Such a hearing necessarily counters the "modern authority" of social scientific readings of black personhood and black culture.[160] In contrast to the hypervisibility of canonical sociological conceptions of hip hop in which rap music is read as a genre of realism, a sonic analysis of the complex aesthetics of rap music intentionally works against this seeming transparency. The sonic causes us not

[160] In my attention to the sonic, I follow Paul Gilroy's argument that the "anti-modernity" of black musical forms challenges the rationalism of Western philosophy and the centrality of language and writing as "preeminent expressions of human consciousness" (74). For my own purposes, canonical sociology, as a "modern authority," represents the development of the Enlightenment philosophies discussed into the applied sciences.

only to reconfigure our relationship to history, as Paul Gilroy suggests in his discussion of slave spirituals in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993), but to the hip hop notion of "keeping it real"; we are both inside and outside of history, at once in place and in outer space. The narrative of *The White Boy Shuffle* demands such a reading because of its own skewed relationship to history and reality. Like many rappers, Beatty dexterously balances the demand to "keep it real," that is to represent city and neighborhood, and "keeping it (sur)real," rejecting the ethnographic expectations for "street" identity.[161]

In their group name, NWA appropriates the bad behavior rhetoric of the underclass debates in order to tell a different story, whether overt or spoken in the break beats, of inner-city everyday life. This critique of culture of poverty arguments and revisionary history of the postindustrial city are the most significant cultural work of early hip hop at large. *The White Boy Shuffle* similarly works to at once challenge pathological images of the underclass and rewrite, or remix, the social history of the postindustrial urban space. Both the metanarrative of rap music and Beatty's hip hop novel clash with the history told by social scientific experts and the mainstream media that simply equated urban centers with criminality. The "hip hop wars" as Tricia Rose calls them, then, were in part a turf war over conflicting versions of the reality of the inner-city. My reading of *The White Boy Shuffle* begins by sifting through these various hyperrealities and surrealities to reconstruct the racial formation of the postindustrial city that was the foundational context for the emergence of hip hop culture, a formation laid bare in the LA Uprising.

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[161] Here I borrow a phrase from Robin D.G. Kelley, though invest it with a different meaning. Kelley uses the phrase in the context of discussing black cultural engagement with Surrealism. See Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* 157-94.

Conservative reactions to the LA riots rehearsed culture of poverty arguments about black criminality and called for further expansion of the carceral city through tough-on-crime legislation. In a response published in the National Review, conservative social scientist Charles Murray argued that the LA riots were the result of the new "realities" of the American urban landscape, "inner-city fads and customs and sexual norms," and, most of all, "skyrocketing black crime" (30). As he did in his famous polemic against welfare, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (1984), Murray argued that excessive social programs were ultimately to blame for the pathology of the black community. By contrast, in their contribution to the collection *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* (1993), radical sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, along with other scholars and cultural critics in that volume, read the "riot as a phenomenon of resistance to state coercion" ("The L.A Race Riot" 100, emphasis original). For these scholars, the Uprising was a protest in response to a broader experience of the "suffering of a society subjected to a drawn-out process of regressive economic restructuring, increasing authoritarianism, and an increasingly vapid discourse about 'values'…concentrated among the racially defined minorities of the ghettos and barrio." By setting his novel during the historical moment of the LA riots, Beatty situates the narrative within a very specific set of late twentieth century social issues surrounding, in the broadest sense, the economic and social divestment of American inner cities. For Beatty, the freeway system that surrounds Gunnar's neighborhood represents the larger forces of "state coercion" in the postindustrial city. Eventually, the form of his resistance to the police state is drawn from hip hop culture itself; Gunnar's graffiti-writing, written on the columns of the raised freeway that runs over his neighborhood, militates against such architectural policing of the inner-city.

For Omi and Winant, class differences within the black community were attenuated by the Uprising as middle-class African Americans realized the coded racialization of contemporary public policy. They conclude their analysis of the Uprising, "The middle class heard a clear message in the riot, one that was as old as the nation: if we do not hang together, we shall hang separately" (111). *The White Boy Shuffle* dramatizes this realization through the experiences of the middle-class Gunnar during the Uprising. While watching the violence unfold on television, Gunnar's "pacifist Negro chrysalis peeled away, and a glistening anger began to test its wings" (131). He imagines writing "BLACK OWNED" on the ventricles to his heart. This scene marks the transition from Gunnar's top-down sociological conception of the inner city toward a more horizontal perception of urban space through a hip hop consciousness. As Murray Forman, following Henri Lefebvre, describes the spatial intervention of hip hop culture, rap music redefines the pathologized ghetto as the 'hood. In his *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (2002), Forman argues that "spatial constructions formed within the discourse of the '*hood* propose a departure from historically sedimented meanings of the term '*ghetto*,' which have, among other things, framed much of mainstream white America's preconceptions of black urban dwellers, regardless of their class status" (64, my emphasis). For Gunnar, the LA riots are one of the critical moments in which his relationship to the inner-city black community is deepened. As his mother had hoped, the family's reverse assimilation has the effect of excavating a history of erasures that underlies the Kaufman's privilege. To begin with, in their move from the suburbs to the city, the Kaufmans reverse the movement of the police officers' trial in the King case from LA to Simi Valley, the predominantly white community where they were eventually acquitted by a jury of their peers. But their fantastic relocation also reverses the larger demographic and economic abandonment of

the postindustrial city, in the process reimagining the hyperreal image of the inner-city in the mainstream media as a pathological space.

Excavating the Postindustrial Urban Palimpsest in *The White Boy Shuffle*

> You'll grow in the ghetto livin' second-rate
> And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate
> The places you play and where you stay
> Looks like one great big alleyway.
>
> - Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message"[162]

In his *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic Over the City* (2006), Steve Macek analyzes how television news coverage and "reality" shows, TV dramas and Hollywood films, advertisements, and newspaper editorials, constructed the city of the late twentieth century as a "landscape of fear" (vii). Macek opens his book with a discussion of a *Time* magazine cover story that ran a year after the LA Uprising, entitled "Los Angeles: Is the City of Angels Going to Hell?" The cover image was a landscape of strip malls and highways with fires burning in the background; throughout the picture, silhouetted figures commit crimes like mugging and drug dealing. In the aftermath of the riots, LA became symbolic of broader anxieties about the decline of the modern American city into a racialized urban nightmare.[163] While *The White Boy Shuffle* acknowledges this highly-mediated, hyperreal vision of urban crisis, Beatty's hip hop novel offers a more nuanced, if fantastic, perception of everyday life in the ghetto, trafficking in absurdism in order to counter sociological fiction. Beginning with the stock

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[162] *The Message* (1982).

[163] Using data from the Vanderbilt Television News Index, Macek finds that over fifty percent of news stories on Los Angeles in 1997, the year after *The White Boy Shuffle* was published, were about crime (151).

images of urban decay from the "7 o'clock news," the novel introduces static that disrupts the clarity of that transmission.

In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty uses the fictional neighborhood of Hillside, from the decaying local park to the modern freeway that segregates the community, in order to contextualize the history of urban disinvestment that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. The role of the city park in the novel, though, exemplifies the ways in which the hip hop novel reimagines the social history of the postindustrial city. When the Kaufmans first move to West Los Angeles, Gunnar and his sisters are reluctant to even go outside for fear of harassment by the neighborhood children. As Gunnar recounts sardonically, "My sisters and I had no idea how to navigate our way around this hardscrabble utopia" (48). As suburban migrants, their hypervisible, hyperreal image of the city corresponds to the popular media conception of the decaying, terrifying urban center. Reflecting the law-and-order rhetoric of conservative approaches to inner-city problems, Gunnar describes the local Reynier Park—one of the few actual Los Angeles locations named in the novel—with the vocabulary of incarceration and capital punishment. The park is compared to "the prison yard at Attica"; the children's enforced playdate there is a "death sentence." Beatty continues with a fantastical account of the city park that mocks exaggerated media portrayals of urban space as a nightmare landscape:

> Reynier Park was an overgrown inner-city rain forest that some Brazilian lumber company needed to uproot. You needed a machete to clear a path to the playground. The sandbox was an uninhabitable breeding ground for tetanus and typhus. Shards of broken glass and spent bullet shells outnumbered grains of sand by a ratio of four to one. Hypodermic needles nosed through the shimmering sinkhole like rusted punji sticks. (49)

Such a representation of the inner-city playground as a concrete jungle, "overgrown" and "uninhabitable," is not exactly unrealistic. Many urban parks were, of course, falling into

disrepair as tax dollars were withdrawn from the nation's cities with the exit of middle-class to the suburbs.[164] But Beatty's hyperbolic description here plays on a long history of similarly exaggerated outbreak narratives that associated a variety of metaphorical and actual diseases with urban space more widely. As Gunnar Myrdal writes in *An American Dilemma*, "the correlation between poor housing, on the one hand, and tuberculosis, venereal diseases, prostitution, juvenile delinquency, and crime, on the other, has been demonstrated so often by American experts that we do not have to add anything to the evidence" (376). By the 1990s, Gunnar's suburban anxieties about inner-city disease and crime, festering within the sandbox at Reynier Park, are simply common sense.

More broadly, the racial formation of Gunnar's new inner-city neighborhood of Hillside becomes clear on his first day of school.[165] A "tattered and faded" US flag hangs above his new school, Manischewitz Junior High, evidencing the false promise of integration for the minority students within as well as the urban divestment of the 1980s and '90s. Walking the corridors before classes start, Gunnar reads a history of US civil rights policy and his new West Los Angeles neighborhood in the racial makeup of class photographs hanging in on the walls. Beginning in the twenties, the student body was entirely white, and while some students of color appear in later years, in 1968—the year of the Civil Rights Act (commonly known as the Fair Housing Act)—the racial demographics of the student body shift dramatically. As Beatty writes, "this picture could

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[164] See Kelley, "Playing for Keeps" for a detailed discussion of the decay of urban playscape within the context of the postindustrial city. As Kelley writes, the decline of the public park was just one example of a boarder deterioration: "Economic restructuring leading to permanent unemployment, the shrinking of city services, the rising number of abandoned buildings, the militarization of inner-city streets, the decline of parks, youth programs, and public schools, all have altered the terrain of play and creative expression for black youth" (198).

[165] Based on several actual place names mentioned in *The White Boy Shuffle*, including Reynier Park and what Beatty refers to as Cadillac "Street" (actually Cadillac Avenue)—where Gunnar is directed to the closer store in his new Hillside neighborhood—I believe the Kaufmans live in a neighborhood the *Los Angeles Times* "Mapping L.A." project refers to as "Mid-City." According to "Mapping L.A." Mid-City is one of the most dense and diverse communities in Los Angeles.

have been a negative of the Class of '67's portrait" (60). Throughout *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty is particularly observant of the relationships between history, geography, and race. In this case, he contextualizes for his readers the ways in which civil rights legislation influenced first inner-city neighborhood integration and then white flight from urban centers.[166] Of course, this white flight began as a response to the Great Black Migration of rural African Americans to the urban North in the first half of the twentieth century. But the desegregation of schools and neighborhoods in the 1960s, evidenced in the Manischewitz class photographs, was a major influence on the departure of the white middle class from the inner city. The loosening of housing restrictions in the suburbs would soon allow middle-class African Americans to follow their white counterparts in fleeing the city—a black flight that the Kaufmans were clearly a part of in their attempt to assimilate into mainstream US culture.

Along with white middle class suburbanization, the origins of urban crisis can be located in the deindustrialization of US cities in the second half of the twentieth century and the flight of industry and jobs from major metropolitan areas. The resultant unemployment and poverty were exacerbated by the dismantling of federal aid programs focused on urban populations, and specifically impoverished minority groups. These social and economic forces further segregated African Americans into urban ghettos, as Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have substantially documented in their *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1993). South Central, where the 1992 LA riots began, is a paradigmatic example of such a geographically- and financially-isolated community; the neighborhood experienced large-scale private

[166] In *L.A. City Limits*, Sides confirms that the Civil Rights Act of 1965 significantly changed the complexion of LA's geography, as blacks were allowed to live in many places they had not been before (197). The Mid-City area would have been farther north and west than African Americans had traditionally been living, but it was in the direction of these "formerly restricted suburbs" that upwardly mobile black families were moving in the late 1960s (193).

disinvestment and federal abandonment in the decades preceding the Uprising.[167] In traversing suburban and inner-city settings, *The White Boy Shuffle* dramatizes these historic changes and in the process reinterprets them through its satirical counter-narrative to the popular discourse of urban crisis. As the narrative moves against the grain of American demographic, political, and economic shifts, the novel tells an alternative history of the post-industrial landscape: one that focuses on the structural formation of urban crisis to counter the ubiquitous imagery of a culture of poverty in the inner city, and at the same time looks to a reimagined culture of poverty in the form of hip hop culture as a source of resistance.

In her landmark study of rap music, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), hip hop scholar Tricia Rose locates the origins of hip hop culture within the social history of urban crisis. As she writes, "Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, and thematics" (21). Set in inner-city Los Angeles in the early 1990s, Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* emerges in this same socio-economic context. Rose's understanding of the cultural work of hip hop informs my sonic reading of Beatty's hip hop novel. For Rose, the spatial practices of hip hop complicate the popular sociological narrative of decline of the US city in a number of ways:

> Worked out on the rusting urban core as a playground, hip hop transforms stray technological parts intended for cultural and industrial trash heaps into sources of pleasure and power…In hip hop, those abandoned parts, people, and social institutions were welded and then spliced together, not only as sources of survival but as sources of pleasure. (22)

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[167] The complex economic and political forces that shaped the postindustrial urban landscape of the late twentieth century cannot be fully elaborated upon here. For a lengthy case study of Detroit, see Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis*; for brief historical overview see Macek 1-36. Edward Soja provides a valuable history of these forces at work in the landscape of Los Angeles in his *Postmodern Geographies* 190-222.

Beatty similarly transforms the terrifying space of the inner city, the popular conception of urban space as a landscape of fear, into a place of pleasure through his hip hop novel. *The White Boy Shuffle* is, above all, a satire of the ghetto and of images of the ghetto, not further evidence of the immiseration of inner-city neighborhoods and people.

While urban divestment did lead to the decay of public spaces in inner cities, it is equally true that such abandoned areas, like city parks, were transformed by urban youth through a variety of resistant spatial practices, including the various aesthetic forms of hip hop culture from emceeing to graffiti-writing. Rapper Melle Mel laments the decay of his South Bronx neighborhood in the early hip hop track "The Message"; at the end of the music video, as in Gunnar's initial encounter with the LAPD, the rappers are mistaken for criminals. In the final scene, Mel and the other emcees of the Furious Five, like circus clowns, pile absurdly into the back of a NYPD police car.[168] Through "The Message," often cited as the first rap song to achieve mainstream success, the group puts that decaying landscape of the inner city to work for their own profit. They are not simply fulfilling the scopophilic desires of the mainstream media for images of miserable inner-city conditions; rappers like the Furious Five transformed urban space through their imaginative labor. Moreover, the cultural work of hip hop similarly reformed the popular sociological image of minority youth as poster children for the pathological underclass. Rather than evidence of stereotypical shiftlessness, rap music demonstrates how the hip hop generation transformed leisure activities like rapping and graffiti-writing into viable labor opportunities within the context of rising unemployment in the postindustrial city.[169] As in its early history in the South Bronx, Gunnar's graffiti in *The White Boy*

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[168] Though attributed to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, emcee Melle Mel is the only one of the group who raps on the song (1982).

[169] See Robin D.G. Kelley's chapter in *Yo Mama's*, "Looking to Get Paid: How Some Black Youth Put Culture to Work" 43-77.

Shuffle is a dynamic example of this transformative potential of the hip hop arts. Though it begins as a space that brings to life Gunnar's worst suburban fears about the inner city, Reynier Park eventually becomes the location for his grass-roots resistance movement, reminiscent of the black parties of early hip hop, at the end of *The White Boy Shuffle*.

With rap music's rise to prominence within the mainstream record industry in the 1990s, however, the originally insurgent culture of hip hop became partially complicit with the construction of the inner city and inner-city identity in the pathological image of canonical social science. Rolland Murray notes within the context of his analysis of *The White Boy Shuffle* that while "hip hop culture generates malleable, simulative conceptions of black identity through technologies such as a sampling and video," the popularity of rap music "subjects the black underclass to the corrosive scopophilia of the dominant culture" (216-17). This contradiction between the liberating and confining potential of rap music is one of the many contradictions that inhere in hip hop culture; though it originated as an art form created by those left behind by economic development, the genre has been incorporated into late capitalist economy as one of its most popular musical products. *The White Boy Shuffle* is set at a crucial moment in hip hop history as rap transitioned from an insurgent musical form to the most popular and profitable genre globally. While Beatty's hip hop novel is largely nostalgic for the old school days of hip hop block parties in the Bronx, maintaining an allegiance to underground hip hop more so than mainstream rap, he acknowledges this shift through a critique of the ways in which hip hop culture is at times complicit with sociological imagining of the inner-city as a menacing landscape of fear.

The Menacing Realism of Hip-Hop Culture, A Sociological Formula

HUEY: Still practicing your "Thug Mug"?

RILEY: Hey, "Keepin' it Real" is hard work when you're cursed with cuteness…

- Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks* (9)

On one of his first days in his new inner-city neighborhood, Gunnar auditions for a part as an extra on the set of the music video for the new hit single "Exhume the Dearly Departed and Take Their Watches" by the imaginary rap group, Stoic Undertakers. Upon seeing Gunnar, the director complains to an assistant, "Too studious…I want menacing or despondent and you send me these bookworm junior high larvae" (76). Like Riley perhaps, Gunnar is "cursed with cuteness." In looking specifically for "menacing or despondent" extras, the "real" niggas of ghetto ethnography, the director is narrowly viewing the inner city through the racial typologies and cartographies of canonical sociology. To emphasize the mass mediation of such menacing social scientific conceptions in popular culture, Beatty calls the video's production company, Moribund Videoworks, "Hollywood ethnographers" (79). Gunnar is not cast because he does not look the part of the typical urban black youth, despite the fact that he lives on the very block where the crew is filming. But Gunnar's inability to replicate the "glossy" blackness of Hollywood here is not simply a matter of his middle-class background. Rather, the ontology of the "real" nigga and the very notion of "keeping it real" are questioned in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Tricia Rose acknowledges the forces of commercialization in her work on hip hop culture, arguing that corporate brand of menacing "realness" can exclude certain realities of everyday life for young black people. She writes, "'Keeping it real' must also be exposed as a cover for satisfying the titillating temptation of listening in on seemingly 'authentic' black life as criminality" (*Hip Hop*

Wars 146).[170] The double irony is that Gunnar's "street" poetry is later scopophilically celebrated for its alleged immiseration of black culture. Through his critique of the rap video production, Beatty mocks the "street" aesthetic in its rehearsal of typological conceptions of black personhood and place. More broadly, *The White Boy Shuffle* critiques the production and reception of hip hop as social scientific evidence of the culture of poverty.

Beatty saturates the song title and band name of this mainstream hip hop production with images of death, but a death that causes no emotional response. The album on which "Exhume the Dearly Departed and Take Their Watches" appears is titled *Closed Casket Eulogies in F Major*. However, the alleged stoicism or nihilism of the ghetto, its irrationality or amorality, is revealed here to be a product of the culture industry not the culture of poverty. The "moribund" rap video thus contributes to the archive of mass-mediated urban nightmares produced by Hollywood in the early 1990s, particularly in popular feature films like *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) that focused on the lives of inner-city African American teenagers. The "menacing" rhetoric of the music video director links his production within the novel to the controversial movie *Menace II Society* (1993), released just a few years before *The White Boy Shuffle* was published. For conservative commentator George Will, who seemed to have a particular scopophilic obsession with what he saw as the menacing nature of hip hop culture, Menace accurately portrayed the cyclical violence of the culture of poverty, but in its realism offered a "therapy" that might stem that ongoing "contagion." For Will, the film was a call to arms for the increasing militarization of the inner city. As he writes euphemistically, "the portrayal is so relentlessly realistic that it nearly sickens the viewers and strengthens their

[170] For more on Rose's critique of the claim that rap music is "just keeping it real," see *Hip Hop Wars* 133-47.

resolve to enforce domestic tranquility" ("Menace").[171] This official narrative of inner-city gang culture endorsed the law-and-order policy of the virtual police state of Los Angeles in the 1990s by producing racialized knowledge of the underclass.

In revealing the artifice of the Stoic Undertaker's music video production, Beatty shows how "Exhume the Dearly Departed" subverts the attention to location and identity so central to rap music. As Rose reminds us, for all the intense local focus of hip hop, rap music videos were highly-mediated productions.[172] The music video shoot in *The White Boy Shuffle* is not the kind of locally-produced block party at which hip hop originated. By the early 1990s, hip hop was no longer the grass roots movement it had been a decade before, but the ascendant musical genre of the pop charts. Moreover, gangsta rap, originating in inner-city LA, had become the most successful subgenre of hip hop at the time. But the producers of the Stoic Undertakers are clearly not local, and thus neither is the "stoic" philosophy that underlies the music and video; *Closed Casket Eulogies* cannot be argued to represent the 'hood.[173] In fact, the fantastic description of the filming of the music video renders any serious realist reading impossible. During the production, the rapper M.C. Smarty Pants brandishes a flamethrower as he brags:

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[171] S. Craig Watkins notes that in fact many of the presumably ghettocentric films of the early 1990s were praised by conservative critics. He argues that "Rather than develop a representational politic that reverses the pathology paradigm, the creators of the ghetto action cycle tend to construct filmic worlds that reinforce this popular interpretation of black familial life" (225).

[172] See Rose 9-16.

[173] Beatty describes the production of the Stoic Undertakers video using the language and tropes of colonialism. The director is named Edgar Barley Burrows after the American imperialist writer Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912; 1914). The sociological image of inner-city blackness that emerges from the video, then, is analogous to the stereotypes of African natives in Burroughs's fiction. Pointing out the aesthetic exploitation of the video production, Gunnar writes "My street was the soundstage and it machinations of poverty and neglect were Congo cinema verité" (76). It is also clear that the money produced by the video is not distributed locally, or at least not beyond the pockets of the local councilman, Pete "Hush Money" Brockington. As Gunnar describes the street after the video shoot is over: "Like photogenic Riefenstahl Nubians watching the white god's helicopter pull away, the Hillside denizens watched the film crew coil their cables, load their trucks, and hustle off, leaving us to fight over the blessed remnants of Western civilization they left behind" (79). The hip hop industry here is complicit with the larger forces of internalized colonialism that exploit the cultural labor of inner-city citizens.

> The cruel druid dousing your dick in lighter fluid
> then eating it up like a roast wienie.
> Oh what the fuck, ketchup, mustard, relish;
> I bar-b-cue niggers so why embellish the hellish
> Full of hate, casting my fate with Satan I'm the
> devil's prime mate… (78)

Though he claims not to "embellish" the reality of everyday inner-city experience, Smarty Pants's lyrics do just that, performing a range of racial stereotypes from the jungle beast to the sadistic gangster, the rapper thus undercutting the menacing realism of the production company. His exaggeration highlights the inflated statistical account of inner-city criminal behavior in arguments for law-and-order public policy.[174] In their portrayal of the inner city, the Stoic Undertakers seem as much responding to the market demand for a "street" aesthetic than thickly describing authentic ghetto experience. At one point, Beatty dresses the rap group in minstrel garb complete with "watermelon grins" as they ask the director, "'How was that, massa? Menacing enough fo' ya?'" (77). In such a thoroughly commercialized environment, the spectacle of the gangsta rap video in *The White Boy Shuffle* can be analyzed, following Todd Boyd's insertion of Jean Baudrillard in this context, as another example of the "hyperreal." For Boyd, the hyperreality of gansta rap functioned to distract public attention from actual social conditions.[175] This displacement of resource by representation is, I argue, one of Beatty's problems with the term "street."

Gunnar's rejection as an extra on the set of "Exhume the Dearly Departed" because of Moribund Videoworks's search for the "real" nigga pressures the assumed "realness" of hip hop culture. Though Robin D.G. Kelley focuses his discussion in

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[174] See Davis 270.
[175] See Boyd, *Am I Black Enough?* 72-4.

"Looking for the 'Real' Nigga" on the writings of social scientists, he closes his first chapter with a discussion of critical misinterpretations of hip hop through the sociological lens. This turn from sociology to song is particularly instructive in terms of understanding the tensions between ghetto ethnography and hip hop in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Realist readings of hip hop culture are problematic given the historical tensions between African American literature and the canonical sociology of race. Indeed, they call back to Robert Park's demand that "Negro poetry" render black experience accessible and visible for sociological analysis, discussed in my Introduction.[176] By looking for the "real" nigga in rap music, critics often rearticulated canonical sociological arguments about the "distortions" of African American culture. "Trapped by an essentialist interpretation of culture," Kelley explains, "they continue to look for that elusive 'authentic' ghetto sensibility, the true, honest, unbridled, pure cultural practices that capture the raw, ruffneck 'reality' of urban life today" (*Yo' Mama's* 35). Elsewhere, Kelley qualifies socio-historical readings of gangster rap in particular by reminding his readers:

> *Let's face it, listening to gangsta rap, or any hardcore hip hop, is not exactly like reading an alternative version of the Times (New York or LA)…Hip hop is first and foremost music, 'noize' produced and purchased to drive to, rock to, chill to, drink to, and occasionally dance to*." (*Race Rebels* 226; emphasis original)

In contrast to the apparent affectlessness of the Stoic Undertakers, hip hop is about pleasure; a point that *The White Boy Shuffle* reiterates in its humorous portrayal of inner-city LA. Beatty's hip hop novel offers a revisionary reading of the diverse cultural work of the impoverished, young black men and women in order to counter the too literal

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[176] Kelley's major critical move is to break with the Chicago School tradition of looking at African American culture as a "transcript" and instead attend to what he calls, following James Scott, the "'hidden transcript,' a dissident political culture that manifests itself in the daily conversations, jokes, songs, folklore, and other cultural forms of the oppressed" ("The Black Poor" 295). In the hidden transcript of hip hop, Kelley is able to locate resistance, whereas the urban poor are too often seen as the passive victims of the surroundings, always already defeated.

readings of conservatives who failed to view the full context and subtext of hip hop culture and saw it only as miserable and immiserating.

In the 1990s, arguments about the culture of poverty in the inner city extended to include the cultural production of the urban poor, especially hip hop and its attendant forms, as further evidence of the inner-city cycle of violence. The violence of rap songs and videos, so the argument went, demonstrated that the communities where those rappers were from were devoid of the "American creed" necessary for successful inclusion in mainstream US society. One of the most heated public debates about the meaning of hip hop occurred in the controversy over the lyrics of the Miami rap group, 2 Live Crew. Henry Louis Gates Jr. testified on behalf of 2 Live Crew in a Florida court when the rappers were arrested on charges of obscenity, arguing that their lyrics had to be read within the history of the African American vernacular tradition, and, specifically, the distinct cultural practices of "signifying" or "playing the dozens." That is to say, their cultural work could be placed in a lineage extending back to African practices, a lineage Gates had partially traced in his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988). As Gates argued in a *New York Times* editorial, "2 Live Crew, Decoded," the rap group was "engaged in heavy handed parody, turning the stereotypes of black and white American culture on their heads." He continues:

> These young artists are acting out, to lively dance music, a parodic exaggeration of the age-old stereotypes of the oversexed black female and male. Their exuberant use of hyperbole (phantasmagoric sexual organs, for example) undermines—for anyone fluent in black cultural codes—a too literal-minded hearing of the lyrics. (Gates "2 Live Crew, Decoded")

Gates reclaims hip hop culture from conservative accusations that rearticulate Myrdal's claim that African American culture was without value. In Gates's reading, the "codes" in rap music, and African American culture more broadly, are far more complex than

other social commentators acknowledge; comprehending such tropes requires a literacy within the African American vernacular tradition. Luther Campbell (also known as Luke Skyywalker), the lead singer of 2 Live Crew, furthered such an argument himself, writing in his own defense in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial of the vernacular culture of the Liberty City neighborhood in Miami where he grew up: "Every day there was some guy trying to outboast another, and the only things off limit were mothers and the deceased. 2 Live Crew's music—and lyrics—is nothing but a group of fellas bragging." The same point that Gates and Campbell make in defense of 2 Live Crew could be made for the "hyperbolic" and "parodic" performance of the Stoic Undertakers in *The White Boy Shuffle*. In fact, this argument is articulated by Gunnar's mother in the novel: "That madness those boys are rapping ain't nothing but urban folklore. They retelling stories passed down from chicken coop to apartment stoop to Ford coupe" (79). She too views gangsta rap as only the latest version of a long cultural tradition dating back to the earliest days of African American history in the rural South.

In a July 30, 1990 *Newsweek* editorial entitled "America's Slide Into the Sewer," George Will explicitly linked 2 Live Crew lyrics with an incident of rape in Central Park. "Where can you get the idea that sexual violence against women is fun?" Will asked. He answered, "From a music store, through Walkman headphones, from boom boxes blaring forth the rap lyrics of The 2 Live Crew."[177] Will's piece directly blames the rap group for endorsing the "distorted" values of the culture of poverty, specifically invoking the canonical sociological image of the failed African American family: "Half of all black children live in single-parent households headed by women. The black family is falling

[177] Such a slippery, racial connection between *rap* and *rape* had been traced earlier that year by Tipper Gore in a *Washington Post* editorial targeted at the lyrics of the rapper Ice-T—though these associations between rap and rape are only contemporary versions in a longer tradition of stereotyping black sexuality, of which Frantz Fanon writes, "whoever says *rape* says *Negro*" (166).

apart, teen pregnancy regularly ruins lives, the rate of poverty is steadily rising and The 2 Live Crew is selling corruption—self-hate—to vulnerable minds in a weak black America" (Will). For Will, 2 Live Crew's lyrics were part of a culture of poverty that was destroying African American families and communities. But Will's argument here was part of a broader ideologically-driven discourse on urban crisis in the 19080s and '90s. Macek argues that this discourse of urban crisis, which endorsed conservative policy positions on issues facing inner-cities, was underwritten by a rhetoric of technocratic expertise. This professional language of urban decay and renewal, though, has its origins in the rational supremacy of Gunnar's namesake's sociological study, to whose work I now return.

Gunnar Myrdal and the Quantifiability of Ghetto Pathology

> It's a numbers game, but shit don't add up
> Like I got, 16 to 32 bars to rock it
> But only 15% of profits ever see my pockets like
> 69 billion in the last 20 years
> Spent on national defense but folks still live in fear like
> Nearly half of America's largest cities is one-quarter black
> That's why they gave Ricky Ross all the crack
> 16 ounces to a pound, 20 more to a ki
> A 5-minute sentence hearing and you're no longer free.
>
> - Mos Def, "Mathematics"

Though written nearly a half a century before the LA riots and late twentieth century debates about the culture of poverty and hip hop culture, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* was published in response to similar concerns about the potential volatility of inner-city populations in the 1940s. As historian Walter A. Jackson relates, the origins of Myrdal's study were located within anxieties about black urban unrest. In the correspondence between officers of the Carnegie Corporation, which funded

Myrdal's research and publication, trustee Newton Baker expressed apprehensions about racial conflict in a housing project in Cleveland.[178] Within a year, Baker proposed a large-scale study of the "Negro problem" that would become *An American Dilemma*. Thus, as Stephen Steinberg writes, to a degree, "fear, not philanthropy" motivated the Carnegie Corporation's funding decision (23). Though his own arguments about the urban poor were more in line with traditional liberalism, Myrdal first used the term "underclass" that would come to dominate the neo-conservative discourse of the culture of fear and poverty in the 1980s and '90s. *An American Dilemma* sought to assuage such fears about urban uprising by outlining a program of social engineering that would solve the problem of race. Within the framework of a scientific study, cited by the Supreme Court as a "modern authority," *An American Dilemma* canonized a hyper-rational approach to the management of irrational and nonnormative inner-city populations that would have extensive social and political ramifications in the following decades.

Despite the contribution of intellectuals of color in his sociological research for *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal imagined African American culture as not only pathological, but irrational in comparison with the rational supremacy of mainstream US society. Racism too was irrational, yet rather than viewing the historical legacy of institutional inequality as constitutive of US democracy, Myrdal idealized his adopted nation as the seat of Enlightenment reason.[179] In the Introduction to *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal writes, "the ordinary American is a rationalistic being, and there are close relations between his moralism and his rationalism" (xlii). The "American creed"

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[178] See *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938-1987* (1990) 20.

[179] Roderick Ferguson makes a similar argument in contrasting Myrdal with James Baldwin in his chapter "Nightmares of the Heteronormative" from *Aberrations in Black*. As he writes, "formulating liberalism as the culmination of human progress ignores the ways in which liberalism not only condoned exclusions within the borders of the democratic capitalist state, but required those exclusions" (90-1).

was a common culture that must include blacks to be coherent, but was at the same time necessarily distinct from the pathologies of African American culture itself. To link assimilation to rationality in this way, to borrow a paraphrase from Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, is to give white supremacy a "managerially abstract guise" ("White Philosophy" 757). Moreover, as Roderick Ferguson argues, linking Max Weber's arguments about the institution of marriage to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's accusations about the "Negro family," sociological "rationalism" was a regulatory mechanism in the production of heteronormative identity formations.[180] Myrdal, like Chicago School sociologists before him, produced black racial difference as abnormal. For Myrdal too, black familial "instability" was evidence of African American cultural pathology more broadly.

Above all, for Myrdal, it was canonical US social science that exemplified American "rationalism": "In the social sciences…the American has, more courageously than anywhere else on the globe, started to measure not only human intelligence, aptitudes, and personality traits, but moral leanings and the 'goodness' of communities" (lxxviii). Citing early Chicago School sociologists W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in his Introduction, Myrdal continues:

> Our task in this inquiry is to ascertain social reality as it is. We shall seek to depict the actual life conditions of the American Negro people and their manifold relations to the larger American society. We must describe, in as much detail as our observations and space here allow, who the American Negro is, and how he fares. Whenever possible, we shall present quantitative indices of his existence and of the material conditions for his existence. (lxxxi, my emphasis)

Myrdal's claims about the totalizing realism of sociological research here at once echo those of Thomas and Znaniecki in their *The Polish Peasant* earlier in the century and anticipate the War on Poverty ethnographic project through which corporate-funded

[180] See Ferguson 84-5.

social scientists attempted to, as Kelley describes it, "measure everything measurable" (*Yo' Mama* 16). His emphasis on the "quantitative indices of existence" traces a lineage between the Chicago School's early social scientific study of urbanism and the technocratic rhetoric of neoconservative arguments about the culture of poverty, like Charles Murray's and Richard Hernstein's statistical phantasmogoria in *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), published just two years before *The White Boy Shuffle*.[181] Myrdal's praise of the quantitative method emphasizes how *An American Dilemma* instituted a rational and rationalizing project that would render the underworld of inner-city black communities at once visible, knowable, and policeable.

Myrdal believed, as W.E.B. Du Bois did at first, that social science could be utilized to finally correct the mistaken belief system that was racism and construct a more rational order to urban space and American society more broadly. But Myrdal's claim here about developing a metric for ethical behavior, a numeric value for a moral value, also recalls Du Bois's problematic image of sociologists who "gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes," while "the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair" (9). As he made clear in *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, for Du Bois, the social scientific means of accounting for persons unfairly justified the image of the ghetto as the pathological source of social contagion rather than a symptom of a larger disease. After Myrdal, similar quantitative indices would be used to determine the worth of a neighborhood in urban renewal projects and the degree of "deserving" among recipients of federal assistance like welfare. Indeed, Myrdal's rationality was more often used to quantify the pathology, the "badness," of the black community, a "numbers game" that the rapper Mos Def mocks in the song

[181] Here I am following Mike Davis in his application of Karl Marx's use of the term "phantasmagoria" in his discussion of the exaggerated official accounts of gang violence in inner-city Los Angeles (270). Marx uses the term in discussion of "commodity fetishism" in *Capital* 72.

"Mathematics" quoted above. As "Mathematics" demonstrates in its metric and lyrical virtuosity, hip hop is a complicated response to the culture of poverty concept. Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* similarly troubles this quantitative approach to the realities of everyday life in the inner-city despite being praised for its "precision" on its dust jacket.[182]

In *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal explained the unsettling behavior of inner-city blacks, following canonical sociological critiques of biological determinism, "as a reaction to adverse and degrading living conditions," arguing that "the Negroes' culture is taking on some characteristics which are not given a high evaluation in the larger American culture" (930). Yet, as I argue in my previous chapter, this structural argument slipped back into the biological through the continued pathologization of inner-city black culture in subsequent rearticulations of Myrdal's central framework for the "Negro problem" in the underclass debates of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s.[183] Ralph Ellison recognized this potential slippage and what it meant for African American culture immediately. Though responding to the widespread influence of the canonical sociology of race as well, he wrote in a review of *An American Dilemma*, "lynching and Hollywood" were part of this broader American society. In defense of black culture, Ellison argues, "It does not occur to Myrdal that many of the Negro cultural manifestations which he considers merely reflective might also embody a rejection of

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[182] Though he doesn't mention Myrdal, Stephen Schryler argues in his "Fantasies of the New Class: The New Criticism, Harvard Sociology, and the Idea of the University" that this "imagined synthesis of techne and morality…had been the central fantasy of the United States professional class, which had been governed by it since the late nineteenth century. It was the ideal that had propelled most of the political movements dominated by professionals, from early twentieth-century Progressivism to the New Deal to the Great society. And it was the ideal of the modern research university" (664).

[183] Herbert Gans has traced the shift in emphasis from structural to behavioral beginning with Myrdal's coinage of the term underclass through culture of poverty debates in the 1980s and 1990s. See Gans, "From 'Underclass' to 'Undercaste': Some Observations About the Future of the Post-Industrial Economy and its Major Victims" 141-3.

what he considers 'higher values'" (*Collected* 139). Following Ellison's recovery of black culture within the sociological gaze, I argue that the emergence of hip hop literature in the technocratic "slum" of the postindustrial city, offered as evidence of black pathology in conservative social scientific critiques, in fact challenges that same rational supremacy.

The influence of Myrdal's study was far-ranging and shaped urban policy decisions for decades to come, including midcentury inner-city highway projects that cut through predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods. In *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal detailed a "Negro 'underworld'" in US cities full of "petty thieves and racketeers, prostitutes and pimps, bootleggers, dope addicts, and so on" (330).[184] Deploying a Myrdalian metric for communal worth, modern planners designated certain neighborhoods "slums," and fit for demolition and redevelopment. Highway developers then literalized Mrydal's underworld through the construction of often elevated freeways that allowed middle-class suburbanites to avoid contact with the underclass during their daily commutes. But it is from within these submerged communities of the inner-city that hip hop emerges as a form of protest against the rationalization of such modernist urban planning projects. Moreover, it is from the point of view of this "underworld" that Beatty positions his critique of urban sociology's attempts to solve the "Negro problem." The "underworld" of *The White Boy Shuffle* is the impoverished West Los Angeles neighborhood of Hillside where most of the novel is set, an inner-city community literally overshadowed by a wealthier and whiter Cheviot Heights above. Beatty aligns this overworld with the social scientific gaze, as it is the home of the Harvard sociologist, "a marginally well-known bespectacled public intellectual who had moved to Los Angeles

[184] For more on Myrdal's concept of the "Negro 'underworld'" in relation to mid-century African American literature, see Heise 127-168.

to set up a think tank of mulatto social scientists called High Yellow Fever" (157). He lives above Hillside, which he calls "a Petri dish for criminal vermin," studying its inhabitants (159).[185] If the exhaustive statistical analysis of *An American Dilemma* constructed a "city of conception," *The White Boy Shuffle* instead reveals a "city of perception" (Lee, "City" 151). In his hip hop novel, Gunnar's graffiti, an allegedly irrational reaction to the rationalizing forces of modern social science and urban planning, nonetheless brings our attention to the ways in which the built environment of the inner-city overshadows the urban poor.

Urban Renewal as "Negro Removal," Hip Hop as "Black Urban Renewal"

> Most Northern cities now are engaged…in something called urban renewal, which means moving the Negroes out. It means Negro removal, that is what it means.
>
> - James Baldwin[186]

In August of 1977 *Time* magazine published a cover story on "The American Underclass" that inaugurated the debates that would follow in the subsequent decades. The cover, which reads "Minority Within a Minority: The Underclass," features a grim-faced catalog of typical black and brown inner-city characters. The opening paragraph offers a physical description of the post-industrial urban landscape:

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[185] Clearly, the Harvard recruiter is not interested in social change. Beatty's description of the recruiter and his social scientific attitudes problematizes the concept of professionalization in the Chicago School ethnicity paradigm by linking the status of the model minority to the ongoing pathologization of the inner city. The recruiter tells Gunnar that "the only reason I and other of my illustrious ilk pretend to help those folks is to reinforce the difference between them and us," or, as he says later, "each one leach one" (159). With this revision of the famous slogan of the civil rights movement, the emancipatory politics of progressive, sociological narrative of race relations is called into question. For the black social scientist specifically, the reproduction of the real "nigga" serves to secure his position within the academic community. Within the broader social hierarchy, the popularity of ethnographic portrayals of the inner city, the "street" aesthetic similarly served the maintenance of the status quo, as it endorsed the removal of the social safety net for the urban poor.

[186] Standley 42.

> The barricades are seen only fleetingly by the most middle-class Americans as they rush by in their cars or commuter trains—doors locked, windows closed, moving fast. But out there is a different world, a place of pock-marked streets, gutted tenements and broken hopes. Affluent people know little about this world, except when despair makes it erupt explosively onto Page One or the 7 o'clock news. Behind its crumbling walls lives a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachables: the American underclass. (14)

This passage describes the ways in which the underclass was at once invisible and hypervisible, unreal and hyperreal, to the American public.[187] The "barricades" of the highway system structure the invisibility of the city, facilitating middle-class out-migration to the suburbs, and containing those working-class families left behind. Though it presents itself as a corrective to this invisibility of the underclass, the Time piece is itself representative of how urban poverty was made visible on the "7 o'clock news" in particularly anxious ways by an increasingly consolidated media focused on the middle-class suburban demographic as its primary audience. This hypervisibility, though, is just another form of invisibility; with its evocation of a "hostile" and "alien" urban population, the article only further discourages the commuter from exiting the highway in Watts or the Bronx.[188] In the postmodern construction of the inner-city, mass-mediated images of irrational and criminal blackness justify the incarceration of the ghetto through the rationalizing force of modernist urban planning, primarily in the form of the freeway. Beatty does not so much offer a corrective for this urban myopia and hyperopia as satirically trace the artifice of the visual apparatus much like a graffiti artist draws our attention to a wall with his aerosol art.

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[187] *Time*'s evocation of the "invisibility" of the underclass echoes Michael Harrington's call for attention to poverty in *The Other America*; for Harrington too, the parochialism constructed by suburbanization was due in part to structural effects of the highway. See Harrington 3.

[188] To do so, even accidentally, is to risk an encounter like that in the opening of Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), which takes place on an entrance ramp in the South Bronx.

Affirming the invisibility of the inner city from the perspective of the suburban motorist, Eric Avila argues in his *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (2004) that the modern freeway mandated a new misconception of urban space. As he writes, comparing the theater of the highway to a film narrative, "the freeway channeled its 'audience' along a concrete continuum that imposed a singular perception of the city and limited the possibilities for different perspectives" (186). Consequently, the economic and racial tensions between city center and suburb—partially created by the construction of the highway itself—were all the less evident, at least in the daily experience of commuters. At the same time, the progressive discourse that underwrote freeway development paralleled broader, totalizing sociological narratives about race relations and urban space in the same period.[189] As Avila notes, city planners "collected 'data' with which they could justify freeway construction as a rational necessity" and they "imbued their reports and studies with an aura of science and objectivity" (197). Inner-city populations were thus made visible in a way that necessitated their own erasure. Like Myrdal, planners and engineers claimed they had "quantitative indices" for the "'badness' of communities" and deployed the rhetoric of urban blight to rationalize construction in predominantly minority neighborhoods.

What was hidden from the view of the commuter was the fact that the unprecedented investment in the infrastructure of the federal highway system through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 (popularly known as the National Interstate and

[189] In *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (2011), Christopher Klemek links the history of modernist urban planning directly to the canonical sociology of the Chicago School. It was at the University of Chicago that significant academic focus was given to the problems of the city and the "enshrinement of expert authority in the field(s) of urbanism" began (48). Klemek writes, "In the years [sic] initial postwar years, the University of Chicago's venerable sociology tradition was evolving into a school of planning that emphasized social scientific analysis of urban issues" (56).

Defense Highways Act) was contributing to the decay, not the renewal of the inner city. In the 1950s and '60s, many urban freeway projects were specifically routed through minority neighborhoods as part of so-called Title I "slum clearance" programs authorized by the Housing Act of 1949. James Baldwin bluntly refers to such modernist planning projects as "Negro removal" (Standley 42). Residents who were not displaced found themselves living in increasingly segregated communities. Thus, the same mid-century highway construction that conveniently carried aspiring suburbanites—as well as businesses and industries—from downtown areas also walled in the impoverished residents of the inner city.[190] Perhaps the most infamous example of such "slum" clearance was Robert Moses's Cross-Bronx Expressway, which displaced 170,000 people from what had in fact been a stable working class neighborhood. For Tricia Rose, the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway was critical in the development of the counter-culture of hip hop in the 1970s. In the context of the post-industrial urban landscape, hip hop originated in South Bronx neighborhoods that had been deeply affected by urban renewal in the form of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Despite the progressive rhetoric of urban planners, the South Bronx subsequently became a national symbol of urban blight. Bronx-based hip hop artists, including rappers, disc jockeys, graffiti writers, and breakdancers, reclaimed abandoned urban space literally as turf and reinvest it with alternative meanings. In short, for Rose, hip hop is "black urban renewal" (61). As a hip hop novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* works within that same tradition, renewing the abandoned urban space of inner-city LA.

Beatty clearly sets his hip-hip novel within this context of urban renewal and decay. In Los Angeles, construction on the Santa Monica (I-10) and Harbor (I-110)

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[190] Alongside other racialized public policy issues facing the urban poor, like housing and welfare, these large-scale urban renewal projects factored into the causes of the urban riots of the 1960s.

freeways were controversial in their large-scale displacement and subsequent segregation of urban minority populations. Much of *The White Boy Shuffle* takes place in and around the intersection of these two highways. Based on other place references, I locate the fictional neighborhood of Hillside more in the shadow of the Santa Monica freeway. But the author orients his reader to Gunnar's inner-city neighborhood at first by outlining its borders along I-110. As Gunnar describes one of his early days in Hillside, "By day six of the ghetto hostage crisis my siblings and I were avoiding the dangers of the unexplored territory along the banks of the Harbor Freeway by sitting in the den playing Minutiae Pursuance" (48-9). The "street" scenes in *The White Boy Shuffle* invert the top-down, rationalized conception of urban space of the modern city planner and suburban commuter. For Gunnar and his sisters, the highway is not a space of mobility but one of confinement.

In the novel, twentieth-century urban renewal is literalized and stripped of its alleged progressive functionality in the postindustrial "great wall" that surrounds the racial and ethnic minorities that inhabit Hillside, "hordes of impoverished American Mongols…Hardrock niggers, Latinos, and Asians" (45). They are prisoners not only of a state-sponsored project of social and spatial isolation, but victims of environmental racism as well. Receiving only limited sunlight due to the immensity of the wall and rained upon with the waste of the wealthy neighborhood above, Hillside is a racialized "Valley of Ashes." Though Beatty's description is fantastic, the "great wall" surrounding Gunnar's neighborhood may be the concrete structures of the Santa Monica freeway or simply a literalization of the highway planners' ulterior motives, the "freeway" as prison wall in the carceral city. Either way, such "architectural policing of social boundaries" is also observed by Mike Davis in his analysis of the "fortress effect" of Los Angeles. Davis locates the origins of this architectural imperialism in the same historical context as

Beatty: the militarized segregation that followed the Watts Rebellion of 1965—in Beatty's description, the "I'm-Tired-of-the-White-Man-Fuckin'-with-Us-and-Whatnot riots" (45). Moreover, for Davis, as for Beatty, "urban restructuring" is "a master narrative in the emerging built environment of the 1990s" (Davis 223). It is a story that includes, on one side, the securitization of suburbs and, on the other, the criminalization of the inner-city poor.

Like contemporary hip hop culture, *The White Boy Shuffle* is a counter-narrative to the fortress-effect of Los Angeles, both in the architectural imperialism of the built environment and the archive of imperial knowledge reproduced daily by the news media. Gunnar's career in poetry begins through graffiti, a distinctly hip hop spatial practice that directly critiques the dominant inscriptions of urban planning on the cityscape. His first poem is in fact inscribed on the wall that circumscribes the Hillside community, transforming that space of containment into one of free expression. The cultivation of his aerosol art contrasts sharply with the ethnographic lens through which Gunnar first viewed inner-city LA: West Los Angeles is transformed from ghetto to 'hood. This generic opposition of hip hop cultural production with sociological forms of knowledge production is the centerpiece of my discussion here. While the jagged fonts of graffiti writing are resistant to regressive narratives of inner-city decay in their bright, live forms, they are simultaneously misread as incoherent symbols of urban crisis. Within the rational framework of canonical sociology, graffiti is evidently illegible, but literacy in graffiti-writing must begin with a sonic understanding of hip hop culture more broadly.

Black Noise in *The White Boy Shuffle*: Graffiti Remixes Sociology

> Back in the days when I was a teenager
> Before I had status and before I had a pager

You could find the abstract listening to hip hop
My pops used to say, it reminded him of be-bop.

- A Tribe Called Quest, "Excursions"[191]

Thinking sonically about the hip hop novel as "black noise" helps work through the postmodern crisis in African American literary criticism by theorizing a space between the naïve reading of black writing as self-evident and the theorization of the black texts as mediated beyond any grounding in socio-economic reality.[192] I want to develop Tricia Rose's theorization of rap music as a kind of noise in order to explore how the reshaping of the ghetto through hip hop culture is not merely a matter of precision, but of imagination. In *Black Noise*, Rose relates a conversation with the chair of a music department who, while interested in her work on hip–hop culture in a socio-political sense, dismisses rap as unworthy of serious academic study as music. For him, the bass blasting from cars in his neighborhood was just "noise." For A Tribe Called Quest, though, as Rose notes, the deep bass lines of hip hop music were a philosophy, if not a science, what they referred to as "The Low End Theory."[193] Rose recuperates the apparent "noise" of hip hop in part by demonstrating the complexity of hip hop's manipulations of sonic technologies. For example, early hip hop DJs repurposed record players, transforming them from devices that mimetically reproduced sound into instruments that created new sounds. Moreover, disc jockeys similarly transformed previously recorded albums into sonic archives from which they created their own songs through sampling and scratching. In doing so, just as rappers often clashed with police,

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[191] *Low End Theory* (1991).

[192] In thinking sonically about *The White Boy Shuffle*, I attempt to at least begin to answer Madhu Dubey's driving question in *Signs and Cities*, "How exactly do we keep alive a notion of the real without resorting to metaphysics of mysticism?" As Dubey writes, "This is one of the toughest challenges confronting contemporary cultural critics…Some idea of the real that eschews both organicism and technological fetishism, innocent mimesis and textual inflation, seems urgently needed in the postmodern era" (11).

[193] Rose n. 200.

rap music clashed with the policing of sound in musical production and distribution, exceeding the limits of audio engineering and creating legal challenges for record companies. Chuck D's opening salvo in Public Enemy's "Bring The Noise," "Bass! How low can you go? Death row! What a brother know," then, is a two-fold political and aesthetic statement: it draws attention to both the incarceration of black bodies and black music.[194] Part of rap's reception as noise is its deviance from the standards of Western musical appreciation and modern legal codes, but this noise is integral to its cultural work.

Rose derives the title of her book in part from Chuck D and in part from Jacques Attali's theorization of noise in his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985).[195] For Attali, "To make noise is to interrupt a transmission" (26).[196] Attali's definition of noise deepens my understanding of how the fantastic imagination of *The White Boy Shuffle*, as a hip hop novel and thus a version of black noise, "interrupts" sociological accounts of the inner city. Attali himself brings "noise" into direct critical tension with the empiricism of modern social science. He opens Noise with the following exhortation: "we must learn to study a society more by its sounds…than by its statistics. By listening to noise, we can better understand where the folly of men and their calculations is leading us, and what hopes it is still possible to have" (3). In contrast with Myrdal's claims about reconstructing the social reality of the "Negro" and presenting the "quantitative indices of his existence," hip hop discourse is a sonic intervention in the decidedly scopic social scientific narrative of inner-city black experience. The apparent "distortions" of African

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[194] *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1987).

[195] For Rose's discussion of Attali see 70-72.

[196] While we might apply Attali's idea of noise as a "simulacrum of murder" to the hyperreal violence of gangsta rap, I want to avoid this mimetic comprehension of hip hop. See Weheliye 10-12.

American culture in Myrdal's sociological analysis, then, like the complicated bass rhythms of rap music, are not so much pathological as in excess of traditional metrics.

In *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (2005)—another work heavily influenced by Atlali—Alexander Weheliye cites Beatty in a list of contemporary authors in whose work music plays a significant role. For Weheliye, attending to the sonic qualities in literary texts opens up a different perception of time along the lines of Walter Benjamin's historical materialism. Furthermore, throughout *Phonographies*, he repeatedly opposes the cultural work of the sonic with the linear narratives of the social sciences. For Weheliye, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black* is prototypical in its use of the same technique of "the mix" that he hears at play in *The White Boy Shuffle* and in the art of the contemporary disc jockey. For Weheliye, the mix "offers an aesthetic that realigns the temporalities (grooves) of Western modernity in its insistence on rupture and repetition…DJs provide ways to noisily bring together competing and complementary beats without sublating their tensions" (13). While the mix does move against the grain of historicist discourse, it does not abandon history altogether. Rather, the DJ imagines an alternative historiography by working with and through the grooves of the record/recorded history to generate new sounds and stories. This theorization of the cultural work of hip hop explains the way in which Beatty's hip hop novel, revisionary and visionary, recounts an alternate social history of the postindustrial city. We can hear the mix at work in the opening pages of *The White Boy Shuffle*.

Beatty's narrator is repeatedly locating himself in US history, but at a skewed angle. From the first lines, text announces itself as outside the vernacular tradition of African American literature. As Gunnar writes of his memoirs: "Unlike the typical, bluesy earthy folksy denim-overall noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism aw shucks Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist mojo black man, I am not the seventh son of a seventh

son" (5). Here Gunnar identifies and discards the conventional tropes of black characterization that have popularized African American literature. In his litany of such typical characters, he directly cites Du Bois's description in *The Souls of Black Folk* of "the Negro" as "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (3). After his vernacular false start, Beatty rewinds the record and begins again, this time invoking classical Greece: "My name is Kaufman, Gunnar Kaufman. I'm Black Orestes in the cursed House of Atreus" (5). Though it is the Greek muses that are truant in "Negro Misappropriation," such referential virtuosity is part of what makes *The White Boy Shuffle* a hip hop novel. Throughout his mix-tape narrative, Beatty alludes to, or samples, a wide range of sources from Shakespeare to be-bop, simultaneously mastering and deforming its source material. The mix allows Beatty to work both within and outside of a diversity of cultural traditions.

Ironically, Beatty presents his "white boy" protagonist as almost genetically inept in the elusive groove, so at first he might appear an odd candidate to represent the technical mastery and transformative possibility of "sonic afro-modernity." But Weheliye's perception of the sonic is not simply a reproduction of Robert Park's interpretation of African American literature as a "transcript of Negro life." The point of the mix is to work against such deterministic conceptions of history. For my own purposes, I am interested in the way that Beatty remixes the modern discourse of sociological knowledge production in his hip hop novel. At its broadest, the rotation of *The White Boy Shuffle*, like the DJ's spin, reverses the progressive cartographic narrative of the canonical sociology of race, as the suburban Gunnar assimilates into the ghetto. Though Beatty clearly rejects the universal teleology of the race-relations cycle, he does not replace it with the particularity of vernacular culture. In this sense, Gunnar's suburban dance moves are a paradigmatic example of the grooves of sonic afro-

modernity, just as hip hop has expanded to what Weheliye calls "nonmelanated places" (206). To extend Weheliye's argument about sound to hip hop culture's most literary practice, the jagged lines of graffiti writing are a transversal "groove" in the urban landscape, one that reimagines the linear and progressive narrative of modernist urban planning and public policy to inhabit a different understanding of the space of the inner city.

"All You See is…Crime in the City": Graffiti as Publishing Industry

> We did, umm, two whole cars. It was me, Dez, and Mean Three, right? And on the first car in small letters it said, "All you see is…" and then, you know, big, big, you know block silver letters it said "…Crime in the city," right?
>
> - Skeme interview from *Style Wars*[197]

It is as he watches the rap group Stoic Undertakers taping their Hollywood version of everyday life in the inner city that Gunnar first begins to think about becoming a poet. His poetry, despite its later reception as ethnography, is thus conceived as a reaction to sociological constructions of the ghetto channeled through the mainstream rap music video. Soon after the video shoot, Gunnar stencils his first poem, "Negro Misappropriation of Greek Mythology or, I know Niggers That'll Kick Hercules's Ass" (85), on the wall that surrounds his West Los Angeles neighborhood. That the poem announces itself as "appropriative" highlights Gunnar's awareness of the complicated ways in which popular culture is produced and distributed, particularly in the highly mediated social environments of late stage capitalism. Given the Stoic Undertakers' minstrel performance of pathological "real" niggas, rap music has been thoroughly commodified. But Gunnar's "Negro Misappropriation" is also appropriative in following

[197] Tony Silver (1983).

the original wild style of hip hop music. Gunnar samples and remixes ancient Greek myth and the myths of the culture of poverty to create his own narrative of the underclass in the same way that DJs use previously-released records to generate a new sounds. Moreover, the form of "Negro Misappropriation" as graffiti is similarly appropriative, reclaiming the spaces of modernist urban planning for local purposes. Above all, Beatty's hip hop novel and Gunnar's aerosol verse write back to the dominant social scientific discourse that has underwritten conceptions of the city as a nightmare landscape of fear.[198]

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, at the intersection of popular social science and public policy, though, graffiti became an easily diagnosed symptom of urban crisis.[199] The fact that neoconservative sociologist Nathan Glazer, a collaborator of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and a proponent of the "benign neglect" argument against Great Society programs, took on subway vandalism as a cause evidences this intersection. Writing in *Public Interest* in 1979, Glazer morally equated graffiti "artists" (his scare quotes) with muggers, rapists, and murderers, arguing that at the very least the presence of graffiti was a reminder to subway riders that authorities had lost control of the city. For Glazer, graffiti is evidence that New York is a "menacing and uncontrollable city…incapable of humane management"—"humane" here, because he acknowledges that increased physical force would no doubt be an effective if not fully legal deterrent

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[198] Rather than a symbol *of* urban crisis, then, graffiti can be equally read as an articulate reaction *to* the problems facing inner-city communities, a more bottom-up version of urban renewal. While the 7 o'clock news told one story about the inner city, graffiti, like other hip hop cultural practices, was a means for the disenfranchised to exercise their own voices. Joe Austin observes of graffiti artists in *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became An Urban Crisis in New York City* (2004): "Writers saw themselves as embodying an (illegal) urban beautification and education program for a fading city bent on denying its own magnificent cultural dynamics and destroying its own 'local color,' both figuratively and literally. In taking the trains, writers created a new mass media, and in that media they 'wrote back' to the city" (4). Following Austin, I view graffiti as reclaiming urban space.

[199] Graffiti was so controversial in the late 1980s and '90s that when the highly influential art book, *Subway Art*, first came out, authors Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant could not find an US publisher (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984).

(8).[200] Tricia Rose observes that Glazer's inflammatory rhetoric "was instrumental in solidifying the image of graffiti writers as the source of New York's civic disorder and tarnished image, effectively displacing the more substantial and complex factors for New York's decline onto an unidentified band of black and Hispanic marauders" (193, n. 44). Not only that, but Glazer also failed to appreciate the ways that graffiti artists themselves engaged debates about urban crisis.

While the daily "bombing" of graffiti artists can be read implicitly for political consciousness, with his famous train mural "Crime in the City," the writer Skeme directly entered debates around urban poverty, talking back to the sociological experts, conservative politicians, and the journalist who had constructed the city as a criminal space. "Crime in the City" makes a simple argument about how the wider public viewed the graffiti subculture of New York City in the 1970s and 80s: as a corrupted and corrupting influence (See image). The piece, though, reflects this simplistic and stereotyped view back on itself: "all you see is CRIME IN THE CITY." But, of course, what the viewer is looking at when they see the work of art is an political and aesthetic statement. The implication is that there is so much more to graffiti, and to everyday life in the inner city at large, than meets the eye. Like its musical counterpart, hip hop graffiti was born in the Bronx after New York City had deemed the area a slum and redeveloped it with a large scale urban "renewal" project: the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Hip hop graffiti was a response to the decay the city had wrought, a way of beautifying or renewing the forgotten city spaces and speaking truth to power by reminding the public of the inhabitants of these abandoned neighborhoods.

[200] Glazer's argument was echoed by alarmist television coverage of graffiti, which similarly endorsed a punitive public policy against such aerosol art. See Macek 167.

While Glazer admits that the resistant fonts of graffiti-writing are "difficult to read," he nonetheless confidently concludes that there are "no political messages…or cries of distress, or offers of aid" in such vandalism, echoing Charles Murray's comments in the aftermath of the LA riots (3). Following Myrdal, Glazer famously denied the value of African American culture more broadly in *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1963), co-authored with Moynihan. They argued: "It is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves because—and this is the key to much in the Negro world—the Negro is only an American, and nothing else. He has no values and no culture to guard and protect" (53). However, Glazer makes an interesting observation of New York subway graffiti that can be read against his arguments about vandalism and urban space. He notes that not only do writers in New York City inscribe the outside of train cars, but their interiors as well: "Thus the maps and signs inside the cars are obscured, and the windows are also obscured so that passengers cannot see what station they have arrived at" (4). Glazer uses this fact to argue that there is clearly no aesthetics or politics to the practice of graffiti, even one that might be missed by a middle-class viewer. For Glazer, graffiti is just noise like the deep bass that rattles boombox speakers. But the obscuring of cartographic and other informational media may in fact be related to how graffiti offers an alternative perception of the inner city. Unmapping official conceptions of urban space—the maps and other signage of the Transit Authority—graffiti writers literally replaced these official, legible images of the city with their migratory and metaphorical "train car skylines" (Rose 45). In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar's graffiti reorients the official narrative of the city as told by the theater of the highway that incarcerates his Hillside neighborhood.

While many graffiti murals are quite elaborate, aesthetic productions, even the writing of one's name or pseudonym, legible or not, is a proprietary statement. Often the pseudo-public spaces that graffiti writers reclaim have been fortified. Writers thus redefine these hegemonic spaces as community places, humanizing such locales and affirming their own haunting presence.[201] The ghetto as defined by rational public policy discourse is reimagined as community. When he first sees Gunnar's "Negro Misappropriation" written on the wall that surrounds Hillside, Scoby tells him "Oh yeah, nigger, thirteen years old and you involved now" (88). The aerosol poem becomes a rite of passage for Gunnar in his new inner-city community. Soon after creating it, he is inducted into the Gun Totin' Hooligans as their "poète maudit" (105). While Gunnar's "street" poetry is read as environmentally determined, the act of graffiti writing showcases the craft of the individual artist and his agency in determining his environment. As a hip hop spatial practice, his graffiti should not be read as more incoherent "noise" from the pathological inner city, but as the transformative reimagining of that space from a ghetto-specific point of view. For Gunnar, Hillside has not only become home, but he reclaims the walled-in neighborhood as a zone of free expression rather than incarceration. Before it is social scientifically "rendered" and published for a mass-market audience as "street" poetry, Gunnar's graffiti speaks from a unique perspective to a specific public: the Hillside community. Moreover, the poem "Negro

[201] In his critique of state-sponsored projects of urban "renewal" in Los Angeles, Raúl Homero Villa argues that Chicano writers resisted the "barrioization" of their LA neighborhoods through such modernist urban planning with what he terms "barriology:" perceiving "multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community-enabling *place*" (6). Like the authors that Villa discusses, Beatty, through his hip hop novel, and Gunnar, through his graffiti and his poetry, similarly establish a counternarrative to the regressive ghettoization of inner-city African Americans. The social work of *The White Boy Shuffle* clearly shares something with the works of Chicano barrio writers in terms of its similar rearticulation of space as place.

Misappropriation" itself listens for the multiple voices of a segregated demographic, expressing local, communal concerns.

As a poem, "Negro Misappropriation" begins as a struggle for inspiration following the classical Greek model with the poet "searching for ghetto muses." But the poet finds himself at a loss. Part of what obscures Gunnar's poetic inspiration is the architectural racism that the Great Wall surrounding Hillside produces. As he writes, "I place my ear to the concrete / I hear nothing" (86). The poem is full of images of postindustrial ruin: the cement banks of the LA River, and abandoned tires and shopping carts. The Greek muses of inspiration are also simply absent. Calliope, the muse of heroic poetry, with her "ranch-style dreams" has moved to the suburbs; the other classical goddesses have sold out in other ways, snitching on their neighbors or taking corporate record deals. It would seem that the elements of classical Western culture absent in the inner city define it as a culture of poverty along the lines of Myrdal's celebration of the "American Creed" as the embodiment of the Enlightenment tradition. The suburbs are the new seat of Western civilization. Like the chocolate city and the vanilla suburbs, so are the Western canon and vernacular African American culture increasingly segregated.

The speaker of the poem nonetheless believes in a grass-roots form of poetic inspiration. However, he is also aware of the ways in which such "authentic" expressions of inner-city identity and place can themselves be appropriated and rendered as mere "noise." As Gunnar writes in "Negro Misappropriation":

> I have a notion
> that if i could translate
> the slobbering bellows of Ray-Ray
> the ubiquitous retarded boy's
> swollen-tongued incantations
> I'd find Melpomene reciting the day's obituaries
> Anyone here speak Down syndrome or crack baby?

Eventually, though, the poet-speaker finds inspiration in a friend in jail: "late last night my man picked up a jailhouse phone / 'Yo, nigger, you got to come down and get me out.' / and i was inspired" (86). Gunnar's first poem thus addresses one of the major issues facing inner-city African American communities: the disproportionately high rates of incarceration that result from state-sponsored punitive response to poverty.[202] By writing his first poem in graffiti on the wall that imprisons the Hillside community, Gunnar connects the emergent Prison Industrial Complex to broader issues facing the urban poor in the carceral city. In contrast to the Stoic Undertakers' video celebrating sadistic black criminality, "Negro Misappropriation" attends to the ways in which inner-city minority neighborhoods are policed. Focusing on incarceration, Gunnar thus remixes both the glorification of "thug life" in gangsta rap and the pathologization of African American culture in public policy.

Hip Hop Block Parties and African American Literary Canon

> And so I play the music of my isolation. The last statement doesn't seem just right, does it? But it is; you hear this music because music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians. Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be a music of invisibility?
>
> - Ellison, *Invisible Man* (13-14)

In the Introduction to his collection of black comedy, *Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor Writing* (2006), Beatty argues that, with a few notable exceptions, "the defining characteristic of the African American writer is sobriety—

[202] As Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes in her *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007): "The California state prisoner population grew nearly 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, even though the crime rate peaked in 1980 and declined, unevenly but decisively, thereafter…African Americans and Latinos compromise two-thirds of the state 160,000 prisoners…Most prisoners come from the state's urban cores, particularly Los Angeles and the surrounding counties…In short, as a class, convicts are deindustrialized cities' working or workless poor" (7).

moral, corporeal, and prosaic," a characteristic perhaps of syllabi in African American literature rather than in the literature itself (11). The problem, for Beatty, as it is for Everett in *Erasure*, is the cultural promotion of black misery in the publishing of black writing. *Sapphire's Push: A Novel* (1996), released the same year as *The White Boy Shuffle* and the direct object of Everett's critique, is a case study of this public immiseration of African American culture. Gunnar's celebration as a "street poet" writing about the "destitution of his environs" continues this tradition of reading African American literature as evidence of black pathology. In his editorial remarks from Hokum, Beatty recounts that the LA school district sent him a copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) as summer reading before he entered his freshman year of high school. His fictionalized reaction is worth quoting at length:

> I made it through the first couple of pages or so before a strong sense of doom overwhelmed me and I began to get very suspicious. Why would a school district that didn't bother to supply me with a working pair of left-handed scissors, a decipherable pre-algebra text, or a slice of pepperoni pizza with more than two pepperonis on it send me a brand-new book? Why care about my welfare now? I ventured another paragraph, growing more oppressed with each maudlin page. My lips thickened. My burrheaded agro took on the appearance and texture of a dried-out firethorn bush…My eyes started to water and the words to 'Roll, Jordan, Roll,' a Negro spiritual I'd never heard before, poured out of my mouth in a surprisingly sonorous baritone. I didn't know I could sing. Quickly, I tossed the book in the kitchen trash. (7)

It is no surprise that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was given to the young Beatty. The memoir, or anthologized excerpts of it, are an integral part of the multicultural curriculum, used in classrooms, alongside Richard Wright's Black Boy, to introduce students to the topic of race.[203] In Beatty's satirical account of his summer reading, Angelou's canonical work has the mock-effect of a black vernacular growth spurt. More

[203] Jocelyn A. Glazier argues that Angelou's memoir is a particularly effective tool for training white teachers to talk about race.

seriously, the author describes the effect of this narrow focus in the teaching of black literature by suggesting that the assignment of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to a poor, African American student is "the educational equivalent of giving the prairie Indians blankets with smallpox." Beatty here echoes Ralph Ellison's criticism of Robert Park's sociological approach to African American literature, "Imagine the effect such teachings have had upon Negro students alone!" (*Collected* 332). Part of the cultural work of the hip hop novel, like hip hop itself, is to remind a reading public of the pleasures of African American literature against a history of reading that has skimmed for pathology even within the liberal, multicultural curriculum. *The White Boy Shuffle* works against the immiseration of black culture though satire. Within the narrative, though, this pleasure is articulated ironically in the Black Bacchanalian MiseryFests, the grassroots cultural events that Gunnar organizes toward the end of the novel. As the name suggests, the MiseryFests celebrate black immisertation. The fun of the MiseryFests, though, is different from the fulfillment of scopophilic desires through ghetto ethnography of the Stoic Undertaker's video.

Gunnar's anxieties about being labeled a "street" author, like Beatty's, arise from the distance between the soft frameworks of multiculturalism and ghetto pathologization, and the hard work of rebuilding inner-city communities destroyed by so-called benign neglect. The radical aesthetic and political movement of the Black Bacchanalian MiseryFests are a communal incarnation of the cultural work of the Hokum anthology. Instituted by Gunnar as a "way of giving something back to the community," they are held in the same abandoned city park where Gunnar and his sisters were once afraid to play (217). Gunnar describes these grassroots cultural events as follows:

> Every Friday night we held outdoor open mikes…under the LAPD's simple but effective stage lighting. We jerryrigged a sound system using car stereo loud

> enough to drown out the noise from the helicopter. I was the emcee…The shows lasted all night, and the neighborhood players read poetry, held car shows, sang, danced…Sometimes troupes of little children simply counted to a hundred for hours at a time. (219)

In contrast to thoroughly immiserated images of the inner-city, there are children here. Moreover, while Hillside is economically impoverished, it is a community rich in cultural value.[204] With their "jerryrigged" sound systems, the MiseryFests are reminiscent of early hip hop street parties, where electricity was stolen from the city grid in order to power turntables and speakers. Like rap music, though, the MiseryFests become popular with "blue-eyed soulsters" who "spelunk into the depths if the ghetto" (220). Still, Gunnar sells the broadcast rights for the popular event to the television networks in exchange for the revitalization of Reynier Park and other parts of the neighborhood, divvying up the remaining proceeds among his neighbors. Thus the city park is retuned to its proper function as a democratic public space. Gunnar further stipulates that the production companies use only minority crews and insists on complete creative control of the broadcasts. The MiseryFests are, above all, a utopian aesthetic and political vision of the possibilities for inner-city community that, like hip hop, renews urban space.

As part of the MiseryFests, Gunnar also starts a weekly event called "Community Stigmas" in which "the neighborhood's stigmatized groups…kvetch and defend their actions to the rest of the neighborhood" (220). Rather than further stigmatize the pathological types of the underclass, these meetings act as forums for citizens to speak for themselves. For example, Gunnar calls upon the "welfare cheats" to "share their fraudulent scams" and "registered voters" to "explain why they bothered." Another event at the MiseryFests is called Psycho's Analysis in which the local gang-leader, Psycho Loco, leads drug dealers in "heartwrenching gangbanger tribunals." A similar gathering

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[204] Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (1991).

occurred only a week after the LA Uprising, when the major gangs of Los Angeles called a truce and met in Inglewood to discuss the crisis. Mike Davis describes the meeting much like Psycho's Analysis: "Each of these kids came and testified…these guys were very eloquent, and they spoke in rap rhythm with rap eloquence…the politics has been there for a long time" (Katz and Smith 24-25). The gangs produced the "Crips' and Bloods' Plan for Reconstruction of Los Angeles," a large-scale proposal for the bottom-up renewal of the South Central neighborhood ranging from building projects to education and police reform along with an itemized budget.[205] While the description of the MiseryFests is fantastic, they are also transformative in how they imagine the complexity of black personhood. The neighbors of Hillside, from the so-called welfare mothers to gangsters, are recognized as possessing both psychological depth and political organization.[206]

At the opening of *Invisible Man*, the unnamed protagonist, like Beatty's Gunnar at the conclusion of *The White Boy Shuffle*, has reappropriated the technologies of hypervisibility for alternative purposes, rewiring Monopolated Light & Power to, as Ellison writes, illuminate the "blackness" of his own "invisibility" (13). The surveillance technology of the police helicopters in *The White Boy Shuffle* is intended to illuminate the realities of the inner city in order to discipline the pathological behaviors of the urban poor. As the stage lighting for Gunnar's MiseryFests, though, Los Angeles's

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[205] The plan was published in *Why LA Happened: Implication of the '92 Los Angeles Rebellion*, edited by Haki R. Madhubuti.

[206] Sudhir Venkatesh's recent work on gang culture offers confirmation of this psychological depth and political organization. As a "rogue sociologist," his work navigates the disciplinary boundaries of sociology while at the same time critiquing some of its central frameworks. In *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* (2008), he reimagines the alleged pathological behaviors of the inner-city gang culture in Chicago as an organized response to the structures of inner-city poverty.

"technopolice" illuminate a ground-up perception of the culture of poverty.[207] Indeed, for Ellison, the paradox of the social scientific study of race was the way in which hypervisibility is a type of invisibility. Within the late twentieth century context of debates about urban crisis, Paul Beatty similarly demonstrates the contradictory ways in which the inner life of the inner city is at once hypervisible and invisible. By keeping it surreal, he reappropriates the technologies of social scientific knowledge production in his fantasy novel only to demonstrate the failures of the sociological imagination. But, like in the mix of the hip hop DJ, there is an alternative history within this critique. Where sociologists looking for the "real" nigga observe the pathology of urban America, Beatty sees rich everyday cultural practice exercised by the citizens of the inner city. The MiseryFests are so only in name; really, they seem like a good time. Through *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty challenges the transparency of ghetto ethnography and of his own fiction.

[207] As Davis notes "ever alert to spinoffs from military technology, the LAPD introduced the first police helicopter for systematic aerial surveillance. After the Watts Rebellion of 1965 this airborne effort became the cornerstone of a policing strategy for the entire city" (251-252).

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